

# How to argue about doping in sport

June 23 2015, by Craig Fry

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Tour de Doping. Credit: CC BY SA Wikimedia commons

There has been a huge amount of academic, policy, and public debate over the years about doping in sport (i.e. the use of banned performance enhancing substances or drugs and other prohibited practices), and [significant resources](#) devoted to addressing it.

Doping is a complex issue – we are still striving to understand how and why it happens, and how to prevent it. But despite the attention doping in sport has received, there is still significant public disagreement about how best to respond to this problem.

Public discussions on doping usually break down - sometimes because of the way we argue about such issues, and often due to inconsistent reasoning. If you want evidence of this take a look at the online comments pages on sports doping articles, or start your own debate with friends and see how far it goes.

Greater clarity is needed on how people think and argue about doping in sport. In this piece I look at the common positions people take on doping, what these commit us to, and the consequences of mixed messages going unchallenged.

## Why people dope

Assuming you care about doping in the first place (some people don't), a key issue to clarify is your theory about why people dope. Your position here is important for discussing the doping issue because, whether you realise it or not, this informs your views on what should be done about it.

Some people believe the doping decision simply comes down to the individual's desire to win or gain advantages of some type. To them, doping is mostly determined by **individual psychological factors**, and should therefore be addressed as an issue of personal responsibility and culpability.

Others believe doping choices are driven by a **mix of psychological, social, cultural, and systemic factors**, rather than individual traits alone. In this view, doping occurs due to the interaction of individual factors (e.g. the desire for winning, improvement, pain management,

recovery, career longevity, economic gains, and belonging), and wider socio-cultural and systemic factors (e.g. social background and experiences, team/club/sport culture, sport governance systems, perceived efficacy of anti-doping system, and so on).

## **Against doping in sport**

The question of whether you are for or against doping in sport is also clearly important. If you are against doping in sport, as most people are, there are a number of arguments you might run here.

For example, you may think doping is wrong because:

- It is against the defined rules and laws governing sport.
- It is unfair and goes against the level playing field ideal.
- It represents a health risk and is harmful to the individual.
- It harms the athletes who choose not to dope (e.g. they exit sport early, or their career is impacted from being cheated out of results and earnings).
- It contravenes other values defined as the 'spirit of sport' (e.g. fair play and honesty; health; character and education; fun and joy; teamwork; respect for self and others; courage; community and solidarity).
- It sends an unacceptable message about the place and impact of sport in society.

The important thing to note here is that anti-doping advocates vary in their relative emphasis on the above arguments. For some, it is all about the rules of sport, and related ethics and integrity requirements. While for others, the health risk and harm issue is paramount.

## **For doping in sport**

Some people in academic circles argue that doping should be permitted in sport – either in an open free for all as it used to be, under medical supervision, or under the framework of regulated decriminalisation.

The proponents of these more liberal positions on doping commonly argue the following:

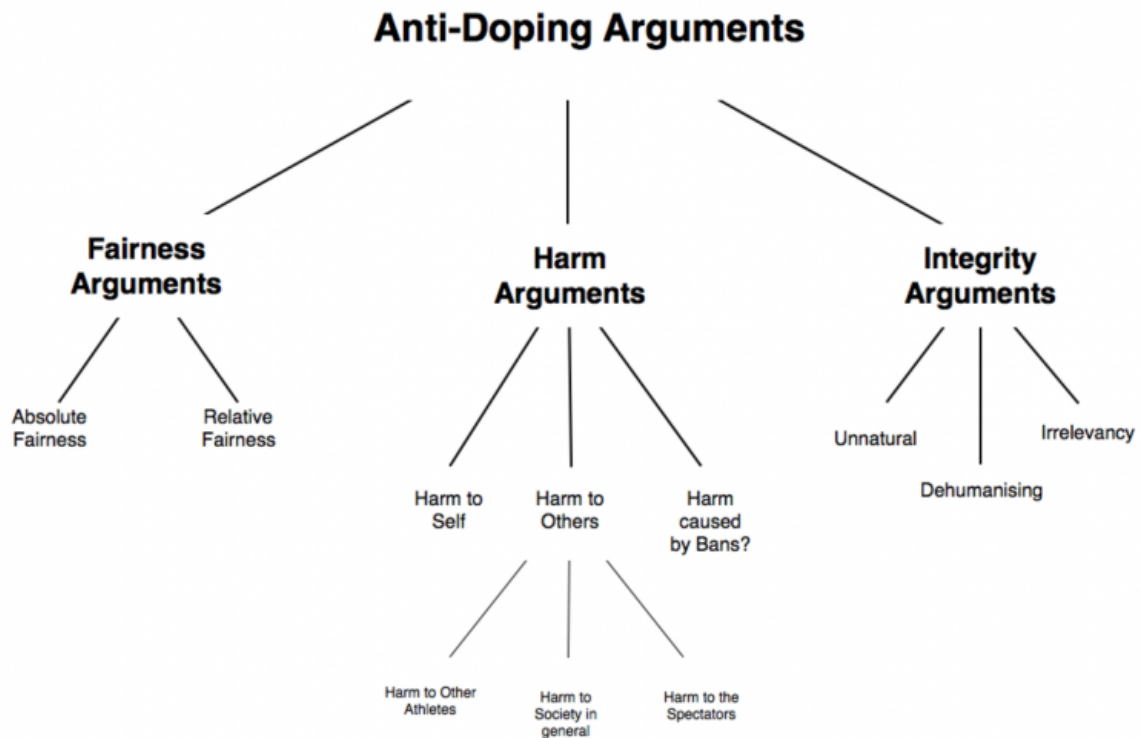
- The level playing field ideal is a myth - there are numerous legal performance enhancing strategies that are unequally available across sports and countries (e.g. expensive training facilities and programs, technologically superior equipment, nutritional, medicinal and other aids etc).
- Current banned drugs and substances are not inherently harmful, nor the biggest sources of risk and harm when you consider injury rates and long-term physical outcomes in some sport.
- The true spirit of elite sporting competition is closer to the Athenian ideal of superhuman effort at any cost (including risks and injuries), and doping is consistent with that.
- Supervised regulated use of performance enhancing drugs and substances, and other banned practices (e.g. blood transfusions) would reduce health risks and harms.
- Prohibition policies and punitive measures create hidden, uninformed, and riskier doping which exacerbates health and other harms.

Again, people who argue for doping in sport may place different weight on some of the above arguments over others. Further, belief in one or other of these arguments doesn't commit you to all of them.

## **Doping prevention approaches**

If you are opposed to doping, you should also have a position on how to prevent or reduce it – your discussions on the topic won't get far if

you're against doping but have nothing to say on what to do about it.



Anti Doping Arguments. Credit: CC BY NC ND John Danaher

On doping prevention you could take a **zero tolerance stance**, where you favour restrictive surveillance and testing protocols, and punitive responses for even minor doping transgressions. Implicit in this stance is the belief that because the individual chooses to break known rules by doping, they should take responsibility and be punished accordingly if caught or if they confess, or make later admissions.

Zero tolerance advocates might also believe that doping in sport can ultimately be eradicated. But this is not a necessary belief for this position - for example zero tolerance proponents might simply favour the strong public message in sports doping policy that includes punitive responses.

Alternatively, you could adopt a prevention stance based on **harm minimisation** principles. Implicit in this position is the belief that doping will always exist in sport, and so the pragmatic aim of prevention is to reduce doping harm (to dopers, other athletes, spectators, sport generally), rather than total eradication of the behaviour.

Harm reduction proponents emphasise an athlete health and welfare focus over harsh punitive measures (i.e. criminalisation specifically). People here are less concerned with upholding individual responsibility as far as punishment goes. They believe doping prevention is better achieved through a focus on broader social, cultural, and systemic factors (e.g. team/club/sport culture, sport governance systems, ethics and integrity culture and systems, etc) rather than individual factors alone.

## **Punishing dopers doesn't work**

People who argue for harm minimisation approaches believe punitive measures alone will be ineffective in reducing or preventing doping in sport. As above, one reason for this is they believe doping behaviour is driven by a range of factors, and so doping prevention too must take a broad focus (beyond individual behaviour and psychology) to achieve widespread and lasting change.

Another claim made here is that penalties for doping such as fines, suspensions, and even lifetime bans are unlikely to deter doping, and will not eradicate it. The analogy often cited here this is the case of death



penalties for murder not halting murder rates, or harsh criminal penalties for illicit drug possession, supply and use failing to reduce or eliminate those proscribed behaviours.

People who are unconvinced about the effect of punitive measures might also point out that even the severest doping penalties are unlikely to work in most cases, because under the current system athletes would challenge such penalties legally to uphold their right to compete, or preserve their rights for future earnings.

Finally, many people against punitive responses to sports doping also place a high value on forgiveness and redemption – a chance to start again with a clean slate. What often comes with this position is the view that the punishment and public humiliations suffered by some dopers (and their families) can be wrongly disproportionate to their original doping offence.

## **Punitive measures have a place**

Supporters of punitive measures do not accept the analogy made between doping and criminal behaviour. They would argue the social, cultural and individual factors (including psychological determinants) of doping in sport are very different to those for murder and illicit drug use. As such, they also claim the thinking behind doping prevention approaches, including the expected impact of severe sanctions (not necessarily criminal), should be different too.

Zero tolerance advocates believe that, if applied appropriately, punitive measures can achieve desired sports doping prevention outcomes (i.e. reduced doping behaviour, reduced harm, or complete eradication). The view here is if doping policy is to include punitive measures (as per the current anti-doping framework), then these should be implemented competently and consistently in accordance with the defined policy aims

and processes; and with clear and consistent public messages from sports governing bodies giving unambiguous support.

Supporters of punitive measures might also argue that it is not the current anti-doping policy framework that has failed, but rather the inadequate implementation of this framework by sports governing bodies and systems weakened by inconsistent practices, ineffective leadership, and ambiguous public messages about high profile doping cases.

## **Middle ground or mixed messages?**

Doping in sport debates are often framed around the two 'sides' of harm minimisation and zero tolerance. At first glance, such positions appear distinct. In reality, people commonly shift between positions or argue a mix of both.

For example, you might believe that doping requires social determinants focused education and prevention programs (including capacity building in ethics and integrity, athlete culture and health and welfare and so on), AND progressively severe punitive measures in certain circumstances (e.g. for repeat doping offences, systematic team-based doping, related fraud and criminal activity).

A significant challenge for the doping in sport debate is predicting how people will think about and respond to doping cases. Ideally, careful reasoning based on the types of beliefs and positions summarised in this article would lead us to consistent responses, but that is not what often happens.

We see this with the sport of cycling - for example, compare most people's strident opinions and responses about the Lance Armstrong case, to the relatively muted reactions about other cyclists who have



doped (e.g. David Millar, Jan Ullrich, Erik Zabel, George Hincapie, Tyler Hamilton, Stuart O'Grady, Matt White, Neil Stephens, Alberto Contador, Alejandro Valverde, Danilo Di Luca etc).

We also see this in the responses from governments, sports governing bodies, and the sport itself. Again, the official reactions to the above cases in cycling have been markedly different - take a moment to reflect on where each of these riders are currently.

Most sports governing bodies and officials would claim they occupy a middle position between 'crime and punishment' and 'education and prevention' thinking and approaches. At face value, this seems like a sensible space for doping policy - the best of both worlds. However, this middle space can also be a fertile ground for mixed public messages and inconsistencies on doping that can undermine prevention efforts - as I have argued before in this Column ([here](#) and [here](#)).

By trying to occupy the middle ground on doping between zero tolerance and harm minimisation - trying to have it both ways - sports governing bodies run the risk of subsequently failing to implement either aspect of their doping prevention policies competently and consistently. Again, take a look at the [recent criticisms](#) made about the International Cycling Union.

Doping prevention efforts in all sports are undermined when mixed messages emerge from inconsistent thinking and action around doping policy - and especially when they continue unchallenged in public discussion and debates (e.g. 'say no to doping' but 'say yes to ex-dopers in coaching positions'; 'our sport is anti-doping' but 'ex-dopers manage our pro teams'; 'strong [doping](#) prevention messages are needed' but 'ex-dopers are sponsoring elite teams, sports blogs, and working in sports media').

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