

Doping's lingering effects – and not just among aging athletes

April 25 2016, by H. Roger Segelken

Decades after the 1989 fall of the Berlin Wall and the 1990s media exposé of East German abuses – systematically administered performance-enhancing drugs (PEDs) to Olympics-bound top-level athletes, without the athletes' knowledge or consent – drug traces have long since cleared from the blood.

Not so the [general population](#)'s tolerance for doping in professional athletics. Significant numbers of former East Germans, now freed of the socialist regime of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), still think PEDs are an inevitable part of high-stakes athletics.

The long-lasting "socialization effect" on former East German athletes is pronounced, says Cornell's Nicolas R. Ziebarth, assistant professor of policy analysis and management in the College of Human Ecology. "Many East Germans now blame the professional sports system for recurring doping scandals. They believe athletes themselves are the victims of an inevitable system."

With Gert G. Wagner, an economist in the Max Planck Institute for Human Development, Ziebarth surveyed 2,182 Berliners, probing for differences in beliefs about doping – attitudes that began while living and playing sports on one side of the Cold War wall or the other.

They were trying to see how "cultural socialization" and "socialist state socialization" continue to shape public opinion, Ziebarth and Wagner report in the European Journal of Public Health in their paper,

"Inevitable? Doping attitudes among Berliners in 2011: the role of socialist state socialisation and athlete experience."

Onetime West Berliners, polled by telephone and computer, were more likely to agree with statements like "Those who want to can be successful in professional sports without doping." And former East Berliners and ex-athletes were more likely to agree with statements like "It is the system of [professional sports](#) that has to be blamed for the reoccurring doping cases: The athletes themselves are the victims."

The survey covered only Berliners over 40 years of age to reach those who were at least 18 years of age when the Berlin Wall fell.

The researchers had this to say to professional and amateur sports organizers worldwide as the struggle continues to curb performing-enhancing drug use: If rules are going to be supported by the public, cultural backgrounds ought to be considered when designing such measures. State socialization, Ziebarth and Wagner said, can shape attitudes toward PED use in the long run.

"Even more than 20 years after the peaceful German reunification, we still find significant differences in attitudes toward doping behavior among East Berliners," the paper notes. The economists highlighted the direct experience of former [athletes](#) as well as attitudes among the general population of "a form of emotional solidarity and justification" with the state where people were socialized.

Their finding of tolerance and pragmatic acceptance for athletic [doping](#), the researchers wrote, "can help explain why the sports system in Russia is under heavy pressure due to endless PED scandals."

More information: Inevitable? Doping attitudes among Berliners in 2011: the role of socialist state socialisation and athlete experience. DOI:

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