

Top athletes weigh in on perceived effectiveness of anti-doping measures

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When trying to determine how best to deter doping in competitive sports, who better to ask than the athletes themselves? A first-of-its-kind study in *Frontiers in Psychology* did precisely that by asking top level

German cyclists and field athletes to rate which anti-doping methods they perceived as the most effective. The athletes identified improved detection and diagnostics, increased bans for offenders and anti-doping laws, which make doping a criminal offense, as the most important methods. Increased fines and leniency programs for offenders who cooperate in the identification of other offending athletes were ranked as far less effective.

"Currently, hundreds of millions of US dollars are invested annually to fight doping—and top athletes have to suffer enormous cuts in their private lives in order to carry out anti-doping controls in accordance with the rules," says Dr. Daniel Westmattmann of the University of Münster in Germany. "But despite the numerous publications in the field of anti-doping, the effectiveness of the implemented measures remains largely unknown."

No reliable methods currently exist for determining just how prevalent doping is, but estimates range anywhere from 1 to more than 60%. Since its founding in 1999, the World Anti-Doping Agency has been attempting to fight doping primarily with deterrents such as the threat of detection and subsequent severe fines and bans.

Despite this, doping remains an ongoing problem—causing many to ask whether these strategies are really working. While many researchers have explored aspects of this problem, Westmattmann and his colleagues are the first to ask athletes themselves which of the many available strategies they believe are the most effective.

"Athletes should be at the center of the anti-doping fight and they are probably the best at assessing anti-doping measures," explains Westmattmann.

The study included 42 professional cyclists and 104 track and field

athletes in Germany. The athletes completed an online questionnaire that asked them to rank 14 different anti-doping measures on a scale of one to five.

The results show for the first time that athletes rank some measures, such as stricter controls and harsher punishments, as far more effective than others. The study also showed no significant differences between how male and female athletes responded, although there were marginal sport-specific differences.

Although these results are limited to German athletes, the authors hope such questionnaires will be used to poll athletes worldwide—and that these insights will guide future anti-doping regulations.

"The results are based on self-reported and subjective data from only German athletes in two sports, but it would be very interesting to carry out equivalent studies in other countries," says Westmattelmann. "Anti-doping organizations can take this knowledge into account for the allocation of anti-doping budgets."

More information: *Frontiers in Psychology* (2018). [DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2018.01890](https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.01890) , www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.01890/full

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