

Venture capitalists are backing a 'steroid Olympics' to find out what happens when athletes are doped to the gills

February 7 2024, by Catherine Ordway and Aaron CT Smith



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For many, elite sport is the quintessential human endeavor. It drives ferocious competition, captures unconditional tribal loyalty, and rewards

the victors with fame and fortune.

As the Olympic motto declares, the limits of human performance are there to be tested—faster, higher, stronger. But what would happen if the boundaries were not just pushed, but abandoned altogether?

That's what PayPal cofounder [Peter Thiel](#) wants to do, putting some cash into lawyer [Aron D'Souza's](#) concept of an "[Enhanced Games](#)", where [drug testing](#) is out the window and anything goes.

Will [venture capital](#) make the Enhanced Games a reality? Despite rhetoric about making sport safer and "the medical and scientific process of elevating humanity to its full potential", the games are out to make money.

The case for enhancement

The argument in favor of "enhanced" sport declares the current system dishonest and ineffective, as [drug use is supposedly already widespread](#). It calls for athletes to make their own body-boosting decisions, and for their excellence to be rewarded with a [more equitable share](#) of the sport-entertainment loot.

As drug use in sport is here to stay, the argument goes, athletes should be permitted to use every advantage they can to secure success. In the world of hyper-commercialized, spectacle-driven sport theater, athletes and fans alike are desperate to find out what can be done when anything is possible.

Costs to participants

As experts in sport management and integrity, we have a few concerns

with this proposed venture.

It's not that we're averse to "thinking outside the box" to shake up existing systems, which are sometimes inequitable and unfair. And we agree there's always more that can be done to reduce the harm elite athletes' bodies endure.

However, any enhanced entertainment value would come at a cost to the participants. There's no shortage of evidence demonstrating the [dangers of pharmaceutical abuse for performance enhancement](#), let alone what might happen when used in experimental combinations and dosages.

Let's not pretend this will be a kind of harm-reduction strategy to combat banned substance use in sport either, a bit like decriminalizing cannabis.

In the Enhanced Games, athletes would be rewarded for "excellence". That means the race to dope, where inevitably more is better, will not be limited to medicines that have been approved for human use.

What's sport for?

In addition to damage to athletes, there's also the damage to sport.

We'd like to think that most committed sport fans would prefer to watch athletes, not injectable avatars. But this event is designed as instantly accessible consumer fodder, not a treat for sporting aficionados.

The Enhanced Games suggests the path to victory is via what many sport fans would regard as cheating. Instead of promoting success via persistence, resilience and hard work, it suggests there is a "magic pill" or "silver bullet" for every challenge.

Even if we leave aside the significant health risks of a "go for it" open category of sport (which presents deal-breaking legal and medical ethics concerns anyway), it challenges the very essence of what sport should be about.

Perhaps we're being idealistic, but what's the point of sport if it isn't at least aiming to be authentic? The main thing these games will "enhance" is the existing problems with elite sport.

More inequality and prospects for exploitation

The idea of the Enhanced Games seems to proceed from the premise that all participants are adults who can make fully informed decisions about their own short-term goals and long-term health in ways that will affect only themselves. This is unlikely to reflect the reality.

Elite sport is not conducted on a level playing field. Access to money, knowledge, power and technology already gives some athletes an edge over others, and the Enhanced Games would exacerbate these inequalities.

The Enhanced Games proposal does not set out how the increased risk to athletes exploited for commercial gain will be managed. The games also proposes to include events in which the burgeoning elite competitors are young and vulnerable, such as gymnastics and swimming, which may have serious implications for these children and their caregivers.

Winning—but at what cost?

Sport has never been a "win at all costs" proposition. Sport should be part of a society that cares about respect, fun, friendship, health, learning new skills and vitality.

If only the entrepreneurs and [venture capitalists](#) could concentrate their money and efforts on bringing the joy of sport to disadvantaged people and help support building thriving communities.

In years to come, we hope to look back on the Enhanced Games with as much interest as sprinter Ben Johnson's 1998 novelty race against two horses. (Johnson, notoriously banned from normal competition for life after failing multiple drug tests, [came third](#).)

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