

## **Sport as a way of life!**

### **A thick description of athletes' everyday lives, sports, performance enhancement and the assessment of doping**

12 minutes to explain a rather complex subject and some research, so: Here we go!

In our research we wanted to explore how doping, performance enhancement and doping controls are embedded in the lives of the athletes. Our approach was based on the assumption that if we want to know more about the assessments of these issues, we need to know more about the everyday practices and the rationalisations of these.

.... approach and leading assumptions - practices, athletes not being asked, but central in the game....

On methods: Interviews with 50 persons, among them 26 elite athletes from Germany representing all sorts of disciplines, including olympic medals winners, professional athletes, world champions, a few emerging athletes, we interviewed in sport boarding schools attached to olympic centres of excellence in Hamburg.

We used narrative interviews that lasted between 40 minutes and 2 hours, set around three „master“ questions that were used to steer the otherwise open interviews These master questions were the following:

**What does elite sport mean to you?**

**What is doping? How do you define it?**

**Tell me your experiences with doping controls?**

What we gained from these interviews were thick descriptions of how athletes rationalise their lives, their sports, assessments on doping and controls – and ultimately material that yielded rich insights into the contradictions athletes have to deal with or which emerged from these narratives. In the following I will highlight some of the findings, albeit generalised for this talk and talk about the contradictions emerging. I will present these in the form of xx theses. These analyses of these findings allow us to make further statements on the contradictions within the fight against doping, the problematic moral standpoints connected to doping or rather its categorical refusal, and furthermore a critique of the obfuscating romantic image sport is upholding about itself – that however is necessary to conceal other aims and truths, which if unfolding would threaten sport as we know it today.

## **1. Sport as life**

What became clear in the interviews is that elite sports meant the total immersion into practices that supported to enhance ones performance. Performance enhancement is the definition of elite sports, shaping the identity of the athletes, becoming life itself. Sport is everything and everything is sport. The everyday life is centred around practices to make sure performance is enhanced, which also means to sacrifice friendships, interests or time spend elsewhere. Success is the reward for all those sacrifices – if necessary by all

means , legal or non legal. However this unconditional commitment paired with the narrative of performance enhancement is a trap when it comes to doping – which quite plainly is just performance enhancement. So athletes need an argumentative basis that can help to overcome this trap.

## 2. Natural vs. artificial

When asked about views on doping or an assessment on what doping is, a few basic narratives could be found: a): doping is amoral and wrong! b): It is against the rules! – the reason why is because doping is representing unnatural ways of performance enhancement. Doping is coming from the outside of the body, not from the inside. Interventions from our sides stating that training, medical care, **pain killers** or technology and so forth are coming from the outside were rationalised via reference to the rules. So in the end it came down to the rules that defined what doping was and what not. As rules are clearly an artificial agreement, a convention made and agreed upon in social and organisational processes, the used argumentation that tries to combine nature with rules does only work if the athletes **naturalise rules**. In the narratives of the interviewed athletes however it becomes clear that they are by far not that naive in their everyday practices and that many know how to **play the rules**, test their possibilities and circumvent controls and possible detection. Moral arguments that are based on the natural side of the nature-culture equation are thus flawed and only work because they are embedded into a larger frame of sports' true values. I come back to these in a minute.

## 3. Control practices as normal procedures

Performance enhancement is only possible if the athletes are in total control of their daily routines. Control is pivotal to achieve this. The athletes' narratives are full of stories of control: nutrition, biometric data, body fat, times run, weights lifted, all sorts of measurements, a strict time management to structure the day – an array of practices subjected the goal for a better, or the ultimate performance.

Doping controls are thus not seen as an obstacle in general by most, often only as an interference with those daily routines. However, beyond the often stated fact of those doping controls being a bearable or at least necessary nuisance, controls may become a factor of unfairness and/or pressure the athletes have to deal with. Beside the fact that there is an awareness of possible limits to controls, especially when these interfere with personal and intimate issues. Although most of our athletes do not see a viable alternative to the system as it is in place right now, they do see its limits in producing fairness or even its potential to jeopardise that fairness. For instance if they feel that other athletes re less controlled, because they live in another countries or else. If the controls are not efficient the athletes become suspicious and feel treated unfairly. But by lack of alternatives they comply. Back to the values of sports.

## 4. Sports' true values

Fairness is one of those values and probably the less controversial. However engaging in a moral debate about doping, which is the style of discussion on this subjects in most cases, the values of sports are an integral part. The spirit of sports are often pointed out, rarely are they filled with more than a reference to fairness, which can be interpreted as acting against agreed rules of a game or competition. Regarding doping nature is also brought into play here and an imagination of sports that refers to true values, not conflated by modern day developments. But what is meant here? And is this anything that goes

beyond a romantically diluted version of times gone by, that may never have been there in the first place?!?

It seems that without a clear definition or explanation of what these values are or what is meant by the true spirit of sports, this is just a cover, an image that a sports industry is upholding to cover up other developments that are not as easily marketable.

Our interviews show that athletes indeed have to struggle with problems and issues that jeopardise their involvement in sports, i.e. the surrounding context, especially when it comes to money, livelihood, sponsors and the pressure that is put upon them from various sides. All of those issues are less often spoken about when sports are advertised. The romantic issue is nothing but a mere selling argument for a global product that adheres to the logic of consumer capitalism with the athletes as its assets. But while assets could be treated with more care and respect it seems that athletes are being expendable and all too often easily replaceable.

In this context doping seems a viable option as well as doping controls become a further factor of pressure, i.e. being afraid of missing a test and being treated as an offender for the wrong reasons. A sport romanticism as we call it, is the necessary aspect to cover the rather unattractive picture of an unfettered consumer capitalism, which is what has become of sports today. Its most important features are the production of insecurities, the imperative to perform on top or perish as well as a multitude of controls to ensure the compliance of its subjects to the rules. Doping controls and the rules are the source of these insecurities – also in the view of the athletes, who nonetheless believe in the romanticised image on the one hand, while on the other they do play with rules, practices and are trapped in the thus emerging contradictions.

A transparent communication about the circus „elite sports“ is needed, one in which these contradictions are part of the debate and are not covered up, not being spoken about or rendered irrelevant. The athletes' narrative yield a rich testimony of those contradictions embedded in their daily practices in the context of elites sport and it is necessary to pay attention and not to engage in what Pieter Bonte calls a moral theatre in order to control them for the sake of the circus and not for the sake of each athletes' game and individual goal.

## **5. Controls and privacy?**

The infringements on privacy are perceived quite different, however controls are an issue that limits privacy, distracts athletes from their daily routines. It is not so much the control as such, but the arbitrary process of the whole system, i.e. gaps in some countries, varying or even lacking standards in a particular control as much as what Helen Nissenbaum call informational integrity, i.e. what information flows to which person, if controls are being held in private spaces, such as apartments, on intimate occasions, day after own wedding, birthday etc... More people than just the athlete are being affected. Compared to the overall efficiency of the controls, there is an imbalance in the system that is an issue to the athletes.

**What's next?** Quantitative survey on privacy issues around ADAMS