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A CRITICAL TASK FOR NADOS: PREPARING ATHLETES AND TEAMS FOR A MAJOR GAMES

National Anti-Doping Organizations are making increasing efforts to prepare their international-level athletes (and athlete support personnel) for major games such as the Olympics, Paralympics, World Championships, Commonwealth Games, Pan-American Games, and Jeux de la Francophonie. Pre-games education and testing is becoming more comprehensive and sophisticated. This is a good thing. There is nothing like an impending major competition to focus attention and drive home the importance of clean sport.

But in some cases such programs are too successful: they can prepare athletes and their support personnel in such detail that any departure at the games from national anti-doping procedures causes alarm and anxiety and negatively impacts on sport performance. In other cases, poorly thought-out efforts to “do it all” results in incomplete or inadequate programs can give athletes and support personnel a false sense of security leading to lapses of good judgment and slackness in anti-doping prevention.

At the 2007 Rio Para-panamerican Games, and again at the 2008 Beijing Paralympic Summer Games, I was a member of the International Paralympic Anti-Doping Committee supervising the delivery of the anti-doping program by the organizing committees. I experienced athletes and their team doctors, managers and coaches objecting to doping control procedures that, while perfectly logical and acceptable under the *International Standard for Testing*, did not conform in exact detail to the national doping control procedures of those participants. For example, there were anxious questions about and even objections to:

- Failure to use the clear plastic bags to wrap the sealed A and B Berlinger sample bottles in before returning them to their styrofoam boxes (in Beijing there was no local or national legal requirement for so enclosing most samples specimens for transport as biological material -- the exceptions being samples flown from the equestrian and sailing venues -- since the accredited laboratory was located in the same city).¹
- Failure to re-seal the Berlinger styrofoam boxes with the purple tamper-proof tape (as seems to be the Australian domestic practice) before storage in a locked refrigerator.
- Use of the comment box on the doping control forms (and whether it is for athlete and athlete representative comments only, or can include DCO comments, or comments about notification or matters other than sample collection and security itself).

¹ And perhaps since the samples were transported under para-military guards armed with semi-automatic weapons.

- Failure to place samples in a special and individually sealed transport bag, noting the seal numbers on the doping control documentation (the common Canadian practice).

When language or lack of training is a barrier to proper explanation of the details of games-time doping control, concern can become alarm, even anger. Late-night phone calls to IPC Anti-Doping Committee members from doping control stations were evidence of athlete worry that their samples were not secure or that their concerns were not being properly documented and considered.

It was particularly puzzling to observe support personnel who had participated in doping control early in the games but who had failed to brief all their athletes on games-time anti-doping practices, leading to needless repetition of charged encounters in doping control stations later in the same games.

Eliminating all unnecessary distractions to athlete preparation and peak performance is increasingly a central goal of national teams. Needless discomfort with or apprehension about doping control is unproductive and even counterproductive. And it can be avoided with a bit of care and common sense. For example:

- Athletes and support personnel from countries with vigorous NADOs and regular national testing must be prepared for major games anti-doping programs that are not exactly the same as what they are used to. Minor variations from national practices do not lessen the security of samples so long as the International Standard for testing is being followed. I would say that NADOs have the principal responsibility to conduct this part of team preparation.
- Major games organizers should prepare videotaped or live sample collection mock run-throughs so that major games support personnel can see the complete anti-doping procedures to be employed, and seek explanations for variations not familiar to them or their athletes.
- National teams should as much as possible use the sample athlete support personnel as athlete representatives in the doping control station so that there can be effective communication back to other team members of the particular doping control procedures being used, and why procedures common in other programs are not.

I have also observed athletes and support personnel from countries with developing national anti-doping programs being, apparently, surprised by adverse analytical findings at a major games. Upon some investigation (unfortunately in the course of disciplinary hearings that determine an anti-doping rule violation to have been committed) it quickly becomes clear that NOC, NPC or NADO education and information was quite inadequate for international-level athletes and their coaches, and / or that pre-games testing was not being conducted in accordance with the World Anti-Doping Code and International Standards (for example, pre-games testing that is not no-notice or with samples analyzed by non-accredited laboratories without full analytical capacity).

Such national anti-doping programs give athletes and their support personnel a false sense of security about training and competing cleanly (and may appear to be a form of organized “controlled doping”). If a national program does not have the funds for proper, WADA-compliant pre-games testing, far better to do none at all and focus all available money and effort on educating and informing athletes and support personnel about the importance of clean sport, the list of prohibited substances and methods, the rules against and consequences of doping, the dangers of supplement use, and so on. This will be a better way to support clean competitors and avoid nasty and embarrassing surprises at the games.

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