

# Doping in the spotlight as Olympic athletes arrive

This year's Olympic games promises to take a tough line on performance-enhancing drugs. But with so many variables affecting athletes, is doping really unjustified?



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**W**ith just ten days until the Opening Ceremony, London is buzzing for the 2012 Olympics. TV cameras are being set up, pitches and tracks are prepared, and athletes are already arriving at Heathrow airport.

Over 150 scientists are also making preparations. Over the course of the games, they will test 6,000 samples from half the competing athletes for illegal, performance-boosting substances. When it comes to cracking down on drug cheats in sport, London 2012 is set to be the toughest Olympics ever.

Doping is a huge issue in today's sporting world. For decades, athletes have been tempted by a huge range of substances that increase strength, stamina and speed. Stimulants like cocaine or caffeine increase energy and alertness, steroids build muscle, and powerful painkillers mask injuries.

These short-term gains, however, come with a price. Performance-enhancing drugs are illegal in professional sports –

## TESTING POSITIVE: ATHLETES WHO HAVE PAID THE PRICE OF DOPING



MARTINA HINGIS



DAVID MILLAR



DWAIN CHAMBERS



DIEGO MARADONA

and getting caught means fines, suspensions, or even lifetime bans. After testing positive for steroids in 2003, Dwain Chambers lost his own titles, and his whole team was stripped of its gold medals for the relay race. Cyclist David Millar and tennis champion Martina Hingis saw their careers nearly destroyed by drug allegations, and during the 2008 Beijing Olympics eight athletes were expelled for doping offences.

For athletes that want to play by the rules, there are legal ways to boost performance. Diet supplements are used by a vast majority of serious athletes, and specially-designed sports drinks can improve ability. In sports like cycling and skiing, cutting-edge equipment can make a phenomenal difference. These methods are not always accepted: recently, a new type of swimsuit was banned because it gave athletes an unfair boost, and led to an unprecedented 135 new world records for swimming.

Even genetic advantages can seem

unfair. Finnish skier Eero Mäntyranta, for example, has won several gold medals – thanks, in part, to a genetic disorder that means he produces more red blood cells than most. The natural advantage is totally legal – but athletes that replicate it with a drug called EPO face instant disqualification.

### DRUGS DON'T WORK

The majority of athletes believe that doping is an unacceptable form of cheating. Sport, they say, is about effort, commitment and talent. Winning a medal should be the reward for years of hard work – not an artificial chemical boost.

Some commentators, however, think it is hypocritical to condemn doping. In sport, they say, competition is rarely fair: triumph often comes from unearned advantages in biology, training, or supplements. The idea of a level playing field is fiction. Sports people should focus on pushing the extremes of excellence – in whatever way they can.

## Q & A

**Q So does this make a real difference to people's performance?**

**A** Absolutely. And in some sports professionals are disillusioned at the effect doping is having. Some leading cyclists have suggested riding drug-free puts them

at a significant disadvantage. That could make it very difficult to succeed in cycling without taking serious risks.

**Q What about in amateur sports?**

**A** The idea that dangerous performance-boosting drugs could filter into local sports is a big worry – and in some areas it is already part of the culture. In local European cycling contests, for example,

some competitors are known to boost their performance with *Pot Belge* – a mix of heroin, cocaine and amphetamines.

## SOME PEOPLE SAY...

**'Expensive coaching is just as unfair as performance enhancing drugs.'**

**WHAT DO YOU THINK?**

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### WORD WATCH

**Caffeine** – Billions of people consume caffeine in things like coffee and cola for an energy boost during the day. Taking it in large quantities, however, is illegal in professional sports.

**Dwain Chambers** – In 2003, Dwain Chambers faced a two year ban from athletics and a lifetime

ban from the Olympics after he tested positive for steroids. Previously, he had been a hugely successful sprinter. Earlier this year, the British Olympic Association's policy on lifetime bans for drugs cheats was overturned, and Chambers became eligible to compete in the Olympics again.

**A new type of swimsuit** – A hi-tech kind of full-length swimsuit, introduced in 2008, was made of

neoprene and designed to improve buoyancy in the water, boost speed, and cut down on fatigue. Swimmer Michael Phelps broke seven world records in Beijing while wearing the suits.

**Red blood cells** – Red blood cells transport oxygen around the body. More red blood cells mean more oxygen can be transported to the body's organs, bettering performance and endurance.

### YOU DECIDE

1. Should athletes be allowed to take performance enhancing drugs?
2. Is it possible to create a genuinely 'level playing field' in sport?

### ACTIVITIES

1. Write an imagined account of a conversation between an athlete and his or her trainer. The trainer wants the athlete to take performance enhancing drugs.
2. Design a poster encouraging athletes to resist the temptation to dope.

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 **NOTES**

