

Doping: a contemporary sports issue case study



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First published 2025.

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Introduction

In this course, doping (performance enhancing drugs, or PEDs) is used as an example of how contemporary issues in sport might be studied. Doping is used to illustrate how you can think about the debates involved in an issue and this will help you develop appropriate skills to discuss other contemporary issues in sport.

Critical thinking is an essential part of studying issues in sport and fitness and the aim of this short course is not to cover the science behind PEDs but instead you will explore the types of arguments used for and against PED use and different ways of approaching an issue. The definition of 'doping' used in this course is the use by an athlete of a prohibited substance or method (World Anti-Doping Agency, 2021). While a prohibited substance is probably easily understood, a prohibited method needs a little further explanation. For example, a prohibited method might include genetic manipulation to gain advantage.

This OpenLearn course is an adapted extract from the Open University course [*E315 Contemporary sport and exercise issues*](#).

Learning outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- assess how the contrast between media sources and published academic research on doping may illustrate some of the topics and arguments that make up a contemporary issue
- identify how contemporary issues, such as doping, often benefit from a little social context and/or background history to help explain the present day
- describe how the framing, arguments made and overall evaluation of a contemporary issue benefit from a critical approach to reading and viewing material.

1 Doping in the media

The first activity helps get you started by searching for recent doping stories.

Activity 1 Your initial overview of recent doping stories

 Allow about 30 minutes

Go to this [BBC News: Doping](#) page, which collects the latest BBC stories on doping. These are mostly listed chronologically. Look at the most recent 30 doping story headlines and attempt to do the following:

1. Categorise the different types of focus of the stories. For example, is there a common theme of stories about positive drug test results, or another about bans/sanctions imposed on an athlete, or other categories you can identify?
2. Identify how many different sports or activities these stories come from.

Make some notes in the text box. These notes are only visible to you.

Provide your answer...

Discussion

1. Many of the stories sampled at the time of writing are about bans being imposed and, in some cases, lifted. Test results are also the focus of some stories and another category was reporting about Russian doping transgressions. It seems most media stories focus on catching athletes and the sanctions imposed on them.
2. The total number of different sports that feature in media reports is surprisingly high. In 2023 the United Kingdom Anti-Doping (UKAD) online records showed live sanctions across 17 sports: athletics, boxing, basketball, bobsleigh, cricket, cycling, darts, football, ice hockey, motorsport, rowing, rugby league/union, squash, swimming, weightlifting and wrestling (UKAD, 2023). Through this short media search you have perhaps already learned a little more about the wide extent of doping including private use of muscle-building drugs in gyms. This gym-related phenomenon is known in the literature as 'image and performance enhancing drugs (IPEDS)'.

This activity shows that, at the time of writing, the BBC's reporting focuses on a limited number of issues. There is very little discussion of anti-doping policy, why people dope (drawing on psychology) or the social context (sociology) that influences them, or the moral arguments behind anti-doping and any sanctions imposed.

When studying doping it can be helpful to gain some historical perspective, which you will now go on to do.

2 What does history tell us?

Looking back through history can help tell us how things evolved to the present day. Any contemporary issue benefits from some context and background into how things have progressed to the present day.

Activity 2 How much is doping just a modern phenomenon?

 Allow about 15 minutes

Look at the history of doping in this timeline and answer the following questions:

1. How much were performance-enhancing substances evident before 1939 (the start of the Second World War)?
2. When was the first Olympic athlete disqualified for doping?

Ancient Greece	Early Olympians use extracts of mushrooms and plant seeds.
Roman period	Chariot racers mix drugs in the feed of their horses to make them run faster. Gladiators dope to make their fights vigorous and bloody for the public.
1886	The first recorded death from doping: British cyclist Arthur Linton overdoses on trimethyl.
1904	US marathon runner Thomas Hicks almost dies at the Olympics in St Louis after mixing brandy and strychnine.
1950s	Soviet athletes begin to use male hormones; US athletes respond with steroids.
1952	Speed skaters taking amphetamines at the Oslo Winter Olympics fall ill.
1960	At the Rome Olympics, amphetamine-taking Danish cyclist, Knut Jensen, collapses, fractures his skull and dies.
1967	A further amphetamine death: UK's Tommy Simpson dies in the Tour de France.
1968	The International Olympic Committee (IOC) issues a list of banned substances. First ever testing at Mexico City Olympics results in Hans-Gunnar Liljenwall, a member of the Swedish modern pentathlon team, being stripped of his bronze medal.
1972	Blood doping method is invented in Sweden: removing blood, increasing the concentration of red blood cells in a centrifuge, then restoring it through transfusion.
1976	East German swimmers win 11 out of 13 Olympic events. In the early 1990s it emerges that coaches had given them steroids.
1987	Erythropoietin (EPO) emerges as a way of boosting blood thickness; deaths follow in young cyclists and orienteers.
1988	At the Seoul Olympics, Canadian sprinter Ben Johnson tests positive for an anabolic steroid.

1994	Argentinian footballer Diego Maradona is banned from the World Cup for taking a cocktail of five drugs.
1996	Ireland's Michelle Smith wins four Olympic swimming golds at Atlanta. She is found guilty of manipulating samples in 1998 and banned for four years.
1998	The Festina team are expelled from the Tour de France after their trainer is caught with 400 vials of performance-enhancing drugs.
1999	The World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) is established as a result of the 1998 Tour de France scandal.
1999	The nandrolone controversy breaks. UK sprinters Linford Christie and Dougie Walker and Czech tennis player Petr Korda, plus French footballers Christophe Dugarry and Vincent Guerin, all have adverse findings.
2002	Alain Baxter, the UK skier, loses his Olympic bronze slalom medal after he used a Vicks inhaler containing a substance on the prohibited list.
2003	UK sprinter Dwain Chambers tests positive for the new anabolic steroid tetrahydrogestrinone (THG).

Provide your answer...

Discussion

1. You are encouraged to form your own view of this question; you may be surprised. You will come back to your response and use this knowledge later in this course.
2. This happened in 1968, which was relatively late in the history of sport. Gradually more and more substances were placed on the list of prohibited substances and methods. Imagine what might have been happening in sport before this disqualification.

This activity demonstrates that any contemporary issue benefits from some context and background history into how things have progressed to the present day. It is useful to be questioning and critical of what you read in university-level study. You can begin to see with your brief reading of doping headlines and history that issues are often complex. To further illuminate a contemporary issue you may have to explore reading in varied areas and be curious about what you see or read.

3 What is the current focus of doping research?



Now you are going to compare your brief insight of the doping-related topics that BBC News features to the focus of academic research. While media reporting responds within hours to unfolding events or announcements, research obviously takes far longer and attempts to answer research questions, with data collection and publication often taking many years. How great is the difference between what doping researchers investigate and that of the media?

Activity 3 Your overview of academic doping research

 Allow about 30 minutes

Go to [Google Scholar](https://scholar.google.com) and search the words “Doping sport” (note that the use of double quote marks will search for ‘doping sport’ as a phrase), limiting the results to the last five years using the ‘custom range’ option on the Google Scholar results screen. Try to categorise the first 20 results from this search. Here are two categories to get you started:

1. The science of, or physiological impact of doping.
2. The psychology/behaviour/attitudes of doping athletes.

Often the journal title in which research is published will give some indication of a possible subject area categorisation (e.g. a legal journal would be concerned with the laws and procedure used in disputes). Try to identify any other categories in addition to the two above.

Provide your answer...

Discussion

At the time of writing the psychology/behaviour related category was the most common type of article. These focus on individual experiences and perceptions to better understand why athletes dope. There were also some articles in the science/physiology related category. Two other categories were found: one related to the ethics of doping and another to the frequency/prevalence of doping. How similar or contrasting are these to your own findings?

The media focus, and therefore public understanding, of doping is very different to research. It is noticeable that we do not often hear athletes' accounts in the media of why they doped. However, researchers are trying to investigate this in detail (e.g., Underwood, van de Ven and Dunn, 2021). It is often the contrast between the two channels of knowledge (i.e., media accounts and research) that brings a contemporary issue to life, creating debate and public dialogue including social media discussion.

There is sometimes a disconnect between how the public view a contemporary issue such as doping and how researchers view it; for example the BBC reporting was largely focused on bans, sanctions and particular nations. This is further complicated because investigating doping can be difficult because groups of doping athletes are unlikely to take part in research for obvious reasons; they are hard to reach and therefore it can be difficult to build a sound evidence base of their behaviour.

4 What do you think about doping?

Now you'll move on to consider your own opinions about doping. In the next activity you will think about your own position on doping to see how it relates to any new perspectives you read or view.

Activity 4 Exploring your perspective

 Allow about 20 minutes

Part 1

To get started, write three different words that you associate with doping in sport in the text box below. This is an anonymous activity – you will be able to see the most popular words among your fellow learners represented in an autogenerated word cloud; no one will be able to identify your individual response. You may want to revisit the word cloud later to see if the results change.

Interactive content is not available in this format.



Discussion

This is intended to raise your awareness of how you respond to the doping in sport issue.

The above initial impressions may be derived from why you think people dope and why you think it is a problem in sport. In the next part of the activity you will explore your perspective further, since it is interesting to explore your perspective further and see how it might inform how you evaluate doping.

Part 2

Respond to the following three poll questions according to your current beliefs and values. Again, all responses are anonymous. Once you have voted, you'll be able to see how your responses compare to the other learners from this course.

Interactive content is not available in this format.



Interactive content is not available in this format.



Interactive content is not available in this format.



Discussion

Did any of the poll results surprise you? Some people think the drive that makes athletes dope is due to a desire to win or gain advantage, while others believe it is driven by a mix of individual, social, cultural and sports system factors. These questions force you into thinking about your position on doping, and when you hear and read views featured in this course, you will become more familiar with some of the main themes in the arguments about doping. You are also able to see how your position compares to other learners.

You have started to look at diverse opinions about the doping issue and you will now extend this to consider how debates about issues partly depend how they are shaped. This is called 'framing an argument'.

5 Ways of framing debates about doping

The purpose of this next activity is to use doping as an example to show ways to develop a coherent argument about the topic.

Activity 5 How to argue about doping

 Allow about 40 minutes

Read '[How to argue about doping in sport](#)' by Fry (2015). This is a niche article and, as far as we know, nothing similar has been written since 2015 that discusses how to argue about doping. Respond to these questions:

1. How does this explanation about different arguments show the complexity of the issue?
2. How does the author achieve balanced perspectives in the article?

Provide your answer...

Discussion

1. The author used a relatively simple definition of doping, which is appropriate for this type of publication. He sets out the different approaches that people take to discussing doping in an accessible way and uses terms like 'another claim' or 'they claim', i.e. these are positions people take rather than absolute fact. It is noticeable that people place emphasis on different perspectives on doping with broad categories of 'protection from harm', 'fairness' and 'integrity' (i.e. morally principled) arguments often being used. Perhaps the integrity argument needed more explanation and you will attend to this in the next activity. The author suggests people sometimes mix their position, which may weaken an argument.
2. The article is a well-balanced piece of writing that is not overly strident or biased one way or the other. The author shows dislike of people mixing arguments using inconsistent thinking and he critiques some aspects of taking a middle ground on doping issues. Notice it is published in an online academic-related news platform, which has reasonable credibility.

Now you have seen some of the different arguments about doping, you'll hear an academic talking about a different type of doping and see if similar arguments are used.

6 Framing debates about gene doping



Gene doping or genetic enhancement, which is the use of substances or techniques to manipulate cells or genes in order to improve athletic performance, falls under our definition of doping by being a prohibited method.

Activity 6 Three main arguments against gene doping

 Allow about 10 minutes

Listen to the following audio in which you will hear Michael Sandel (an academic) talk about his position against gene doping. To what extent are the same or additional arguments used to those you have just read about in Activity 5?

Audio content is not available in this format.



Ways of framing debates about doping

Provide your answer...

Discussion

The use of 'fairness' and 'protection from harm' arguments reinforces what you have already read. However, Sandel adds to these with his main argument, about doping distancing us from the human dimension of sport; this is an example of the integrity (morally principled) based perspective. Doping can be said to dehumanise the experience of sport; it becomes unnatural. You may have noticed it is rather similar

to elements of the '**spirit of sport**' response you considered in Activity 4 – with genetic modification it can be viewed that this is not natural or in, Sandel's terms, 'not human'.

The title of this section is about framing an issue and you have started to see the different ways framing is achieved. The way an issue is introduced and consistently argued can help define the parts of the argument an author feels are most important. For example, if an author frames the debate by saying that anti-doping can make sport fairer, it frames the issue in relation to equity and would not focus on some of the arguments you have just read about.

Here are some other examples of where how you frame something can influence debate:

- framing concussion in sport from a 'prevention strategies' perspective, i.e. effective approaches to prevent its occurrence
- framing the use of role models as the answer to underrepresented groups becoming coaches, i.e. this perhaps ignores wider structural issues that prevent these groups accessing coach education
- framing transgender athletes as having genetic advantages shapes the topic towards male-to-female transitions, and ignores wider social issues and barriers.

You will now see what happens when debates are not clearly framed.

7 What happens to debates with little framing?

A place where debates about doping are often very open ended and are often not framed, is social media or in the comment sections that accompany online material on some platforms such as YouTube. You are about to look at some typical online comments made about doping, which partly demonstrates how some people randomly express their personal perspective with no particular common thread or clearly framed argument.

Activity 7 Online comments about doping

 Allow about 10 minutes

Read the examples of comments below (in Figure 1) typically found on online platforms. Try to identify the types of positions people take, drawing on what you read in Activity 5, for example, positions about: protection from harm, fairness, zero tolerance and the spirit of sport.



Figure 1 Examples of perspectives on doping that might be found online

Provide your answer...

Discussion

There are examples of simple framing in these posts (e.g. Post 1 – sport is inherently unfair, Post 2 – social and cultural pressures are responsible). Simple framing can become the dominant discourse, partly as it may be easier for the public to understand. In the realm of social media, it can be distilled to short sound bites or sentences. This then skews discussions on complex issues towards the simpler ways of framing them rather than taking account of more complex positions and critique of multiple influencing factors.

You have seen how discussions with little framing can become rather over-simplistic. Next you will move onto to a more complex, nuanced example of framing.

8 Framing in action: a doping example



So far, you have been discussing doping generally, but now you will see further how framing can lead arguments in a certain direction. Activity 2 provided some context to exploring the topic; you will now extend the historical context further.

Activity 8 Framing doping with a historical perspective

 Allow about 15 minutes

Listen to this brief audio outline of some of the influences that led to the founding of the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) – the agency who decides what substances and methods are ‘prohibited’.

How does this framing help to show why sport is different to other forms of cultural activities, such as the music industry or arts, in having regulation of performance-enhancing aids?

Audio content is not available in this format.



Doping in sport

Provide your answer...

Discussion

Competitive sport has unique national and cultural significance because it is partly connected to national identity. Nations compete against each other for success and prestige both in competition and in staging major events. Compare this to the music sector, which has very limited doping intervention because it doesn't have as much

national significance. Sport has notions of the 'spirit of sport' that was mentioned in Activities 5 and 7.

You might also consider *who* then influences WADA global policy. This might occur through nations with greater **political capital** who have their own policy agendas on illicit substances (e.g. the United States). This more detailed historical framing beyond a simple timeline throws up further questions about how it took so long for global collaboration on this issue.

Hopefully you will agree that this information provides very useful background context, which suggests that some historical framing of an issue, if kept relatively brief, can be useful near the start of any discussion.

Next, you will move on to thinking about the importance of the question that is being asked in a contemporary issue debate.

9 Assessing the question being asked

Often the question asked in a media report or an academic assessment invites the argument to be framed in a particular way. The question asked in the title of the next activity could lead the argument in several particular moral or ethical directions.

Activity 9 Should dopers continue to benefit from their sport?

 Allow about 20 minutes

This question – should dopers continue to benefit from their sport? – encourages the argument to be framed towards what should be done about doping, particularly regarding sanctions. Part of answering the question involves considering why people dope in the first place and what policies might prevent this behaviour. This question cannot be answered in full here but you are able to watch a first-hand account from a doper.

Watch this video of top past performer in the 100m, Tim Montgomery (USA), explaining why he doped. Notice he is continuing to benefit from the sport by coaching others and may have received an appearance fee for his involvement in this clip.

Video content is not available in this format.
Framing in action: a doping example



Answer these two questions:

1. Think back to how you responded to two of the questions in Activity 4 (What is the *main* reason behind athlete doping other than 'winning'? What should be done about doping?). How do these responses inform your position in relation to Montgomery's experience?
2. To what extent can an individual who has been found guilty of doping be allowed to work in influential roles such as coaching?

Provide your answer...

Discussion

1. In light of Montgomery's testimony, the answer to 'Why do people dope?' might focus on his own individual actions. Perhaps you may feel that, although he does not mention it, the whole system of elite sport encourages record breaking and pushing your body to new limits to gain financial reward/ recognition.
2. It is very difficult to legally prevent money being earned from a sport. People can perhaps be stripped of coaching qualifications, but they can still mentor others and appear in videos such as the one in this activity. Arguably, if organisations cannot implement a ban, it is not worth attempting to do so and for some, rehabilitation and a role in educating young athletes may sometimes be likely to result in positive outcomes. Former cyclist and former doper David Millar (UK) is a good example of this.

Now, the course changes tack somewhat and considers the role of looking at the doping issue in a different context far removed from professional cycling and athletics: public gyms.

10 Does comparison change perspectives?



Some comparison and contrast within a contemporary issue like doping may help give additional perspective. The situational contrast here, doping in public gyms, represents a very different context to doping in sport. Examples from a change in context can be useful to illustrate subtle differences in an argument. The gene doping example partly illustrated this (Activity 6).

You will now use a comparison to consider what happens in communities of people who use the gym partly to change how they look in terms of bulking up by lifting heavy weights, some of whom may use steroids. These steroids are known as IPEDs (image and performance enhancing drugs, mentioned at the start of the course).

In the next activity you are going to compare a media perspective and an academic perspective by examining two short pieces of writing about steroid use in gyms – one from the BBC and another from a journal. There are separate questions and comments to consider as you read each article.

Activity 10 Steroid use in gyms

 Allow about 30 minutes

Part 1

1. First, read [UK Anti-Doping warns young men not to use steroids in pursuit of 'ideal' body](#) (BBC, 2020).
2. How has the article been framed?

Provide your answer...

Discussion

The framing is related to alarm at the public health issue among young men who are influenced by body image, social media and the easy availability of steroids. If you find such a media article when you come to do your own research, it would be very wise to follow up the three pieces of research it refers to.

Part 2

1. Now read the brief abstract and section snippets of the article, [Superheroes – Image and performance enhancing drug \(IPED\) use within the UK, social media and gym culture](#) (Richardson, Dixon and Kean, 2019).
2. How might an understanding of the views of IPED users ('user voice') be useful for those in the legal medicine field (part of the journal name)?

Provide your answer...

Discussion

The article claims that the impact of steroid use in gyms on the individual and on society has not been investigated from the perspective of users before and it is implied that their voice will help shape the legal aspects of how this practice can be best managed. Users told researchers how social media and the web black market (the Dark Web) all play a part in the contemporary use of steroids. However, the control of steroid use is not discussed in any detail. If you were exploring this topic further you might investigate the legalities of personal use or supply of steroids.

In this gym context, the 'protection from harm' argument is used most strongly and the number of people using steroids in this context is probably higher than in competitive sport (e.g. Morris, 2018). This perhaps makes it more of a concern as a public health issue.

You have now considered doping from a range of perspectives, and you have seen how comparison between doping in sport and doping in gyms provides further insights. You will now think about how to conclude an issue-related discussion.

11 Working towards a conclusion

If you have studied with The Open University or written assignments at another university, you will know that a good written argument works towards a conclusion, drawing on the evidence that has been presented. A further skill in drawing an argument together is careful use of language to convey that there are often uncertainties in claimed facts or arguments. For example, you have already heard how 'claims' can be a useful term. Also, use of hedging words (such as 'maybe', 'appear to', 'perhaps', 'indicate', 'suggest', 'sometimes', 'often', 'mostly' 'partly' or 'probably') can ensure your writing recognises that evidence may not always be clear-cut.

You will now hear a group of academics from Loughborough University begin to pull together their discussion about doping in sport.

Activity 11 Pulling together a discussion

 Allow about 20 minutes

For context, immediately before this clip, the discussion featured some arguments for the use of doping, such as:

- Sport is part of the entertainment industry: we don't regulate drug use in rock music or in acting/film-making.
- Fairness – poor countries don't have access to computer analysis or expensive cycling/rowing/sailing equipment or high-altitude training camps, which maintains rich countries' dominance in the Olympic Games medals table. For some, doping represents a cheap science.
- While harm reduction arguments against doping are often used, in contact sports we avoid saying, 'don't play rugby', or, 'don't box', because they're dangerous. How can we legitimately say 'avoid some drugs' because they could be dangerous?

Listen to this audio and identify the following.

1. What are the main moral and commercial arguments for strongly supporting anti-doping?
2. What other complexities are raised in this attempt to conclude a discussion about doping?

Audio content is not available in this format.



Working towards a conclusion

Provide your answer...

Discussion

1. In their discussion the academics came to a clear conclusion about why anti-doping is so important. The main moral argument is about sport having

distinctive qualities and moral characteristics (i.e. the 'spirit of sport'). A commercial argument was expressed about the unique selling point of sport being its youthful and relatively clean image. They claimed this image needs to be protected in the mass media and among parents.

2. The complexities include the inconsistency of some parents being happy to risk their children taking human growth hormone drugs to develop for particular sports. Possible inconsistencies exist in sports organisations not always robustly policing their sports for fear of harming its commercial image. This opens debate to how effectively sports are governed, which has been deliberately kept out of scope to help keep the argument focused.

Although you have only scratched the surface of the doping issue, here is an example of what could be summarised as a tentative conclusion in our short doping example.

- Continued collaboration around the world is important to help tackle doping, and the establishment of WADA has been key to this.
- It is difficult to talk about drug-free sport since, as history shows, sport has never been clean and eliminating doping is virtually impossible, just as a crime-free society is unlikely. Instead, sport should aspire to reduce doping to the lowest levels it can.
- Sports being removed from the Olympic Games for continued doping offences may provide a good incentive for organisations to act robustly to preserve the spirit of sport.

Next you will look back at some of the main learning points from the course.

Conclusion

In this course you have looked at doping as an example of exploring a topic and ways in which arguments might be developed. The skills that you have covered in this course are useful for university-level study.

The main learning points for the course are:

- A contemporary issue like doping often benefits from a little social context and background history into how things have evolved to the present day.
- The framing of arguments about an issue is important, and simple framing can ignore the complexities and nuance of factors influencing an issue.
- Use of comparison and contrast between contexts, evidence or different groups involved in a contemporary issue can be useful in showing subtle differences between them.
- Pulling together a discussion towards a conclusion is an important skill and in the doping in sport example this was illustrated by being distilled down to three points (outlined in Section 11).

This OpenLearn course is an adapted extract from the Open University course [*E315 Contemporary sport and exercise issues*](#).

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Glossary

political capital

This is used in political theory to conceptualise the accumulation of resources and power built through relationships, trust, goodwill and credibility. It might be thought of as a type of credit used to achieve reform or accomplish other goals.

spirit of sport

The celebration of the human spirit, body and mind, and is reflected in 'ethics, fairplay and honesty; health; excellence in performance; character and education; fun and joy; teamwork; dedication and commitment; respect for rules and laws; respect for self and other participants; courage; community and solidarity' (WADA, 2017).