

Review: Cleaning Out the Competition

A uniform antidoping policy ignores the nuances and temptations of different sports and introduces its own set of contradictions. David Papineau reviews 'Good Sport' by Thomas H. Murray.

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By David Papineau

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The road to the Olympics is a hard one, and not just because of the arduous training that the athletes must endure. For all the hours they spend at the gym, on the track or in the field, the athletes must also go to great lengths to show that they are competing clean. This includes being permanently on call, ready for drug testers who may come around at any time. Being cited for a “whereabouts failure”—among the most common code violations—will earn an athlete a cloud of suspicion along with an official suspension.

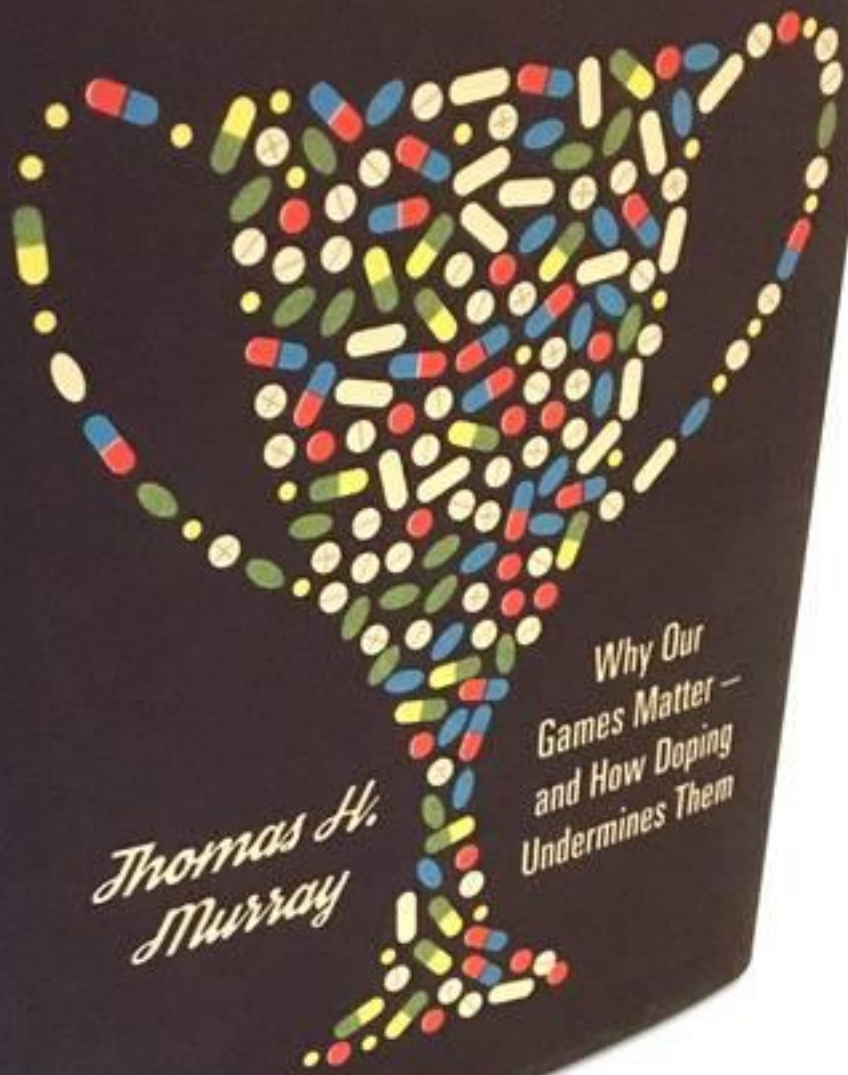
The special jeopardies faced by athletes in the Olympics and other venues doesn't stop there. Nearly 10% of all suspensions issued by the U.S. Anti-Doping Agency

(Usada) have been for traces of cannabis—hardly the stuff to help gain an edge in sport. Usada explains that it defers on these matters to the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA), set up in 1999 to “harmonize anti-doping efforts around the world across all sports.” Given the many factions that WADA must please, it understandably toes an orthodox line on mood-enhancing drugs. Cocaine is therefore also on the prohibited list, though alcohol and nicotine are not.

Recreational drugs are not the only oddities on the WADA list. Currently athletes are prohibited from blood doping, or extracting their own blood and then transfusing it later to increase their ability to carry oxygen. Yet it is acceptable for athletes to produce the same effect by sleeping in an artificial low-oxygen chamber. Then there are the “therapeutic use exemptions.” Many performance-enhancing drugs have normal medical applications for conditions such as asthma or hormone deficiency. In practice, special permissions are given to athletes with those conditions. But how ill do they need to be, and what dosages can they take?

If anybody can explain WADA’s thinking on these matters, it is Thomas H. Murray. A former president of the American Society for Bioethics and Humanities, he was for many years chairman of the Ethical Issues Review Panel at WADA. It cannot be said, however, that he puts WADA’s principles on a firm foundation. In “Good Sport: Why Our Games Matter—and How Doping Undermines Them,” Mr. Murray is nothing if not spirited in his defense of WADA’s regulatory regime. But anybody with doubts about its policies is unlikely to be won over.

Good Sport



*Thomas H.
Murray*

Why Our
Games Matter —
and How Doping
Undermines Them

Good Sport

Murray

CAZZANO

Many serious commentators think that antidoping measures in sports do more harm than good. For these skeptics, attempts to make sports fair by stamping out drugs are doomed to fail. Dopers will always stay ahead of the testers, so testing only succeeds in putting the clean athletes at a disadvantage. To level the playing field, these skeptics argue, we would do better to remove all restrictions and leave it to the athletes to decide how to prepare for competition.

As to the worry that athletes would then be forced into a health-destroying arms race of drug abuse, the skeptics respond that most banned drugs pose no real health hazard. For genuinely dangerous drugs, they say, it would be much safer to bring them out into the open and research their effects properly rather than have them dispensed by dodgy doctors.

Mr. Murray gives these ideas a fair hearing but responds that they are missing the point. As he sees it, doping is inconsistent with the very meaning of sport. He places great emphasis on “natural” talent. What we admire in athletes, he says, is the discipline and courage with which they harness their natural abilities. The shortcut of artificial chemicals negates the value of sports. But we need to stretch the idea of naturalness pretty far if it is to include the hi-tech equipment, dietary supplements and intensive training regimes of many “clean” athletes. And what about the elevated levels of testosterone enjoyed by some female athletes, such as the South African middle-distance runner Caster Semenya? Mr. Murray favors the view that they need to be lowered for Ms. Semenya to compete, despite their being a very natural part of her biological makeup.

We can all agree that nobody really admires the feats of competitors who are inflated by steroids or hopped-up on stimulants. We want sports to show us what humans can aspire to achieve. Performance-enhancing drugs should have no part in that. But this is a matter of integrity and dignity rather than of any dubious violation of biological “naturalness.”

When it comes to what we admire in sport, not all endeavors are the same. The virtues displayed by a marathon runner are very different from those of a boxer. The doping temptations are different, too. WADA might therefore do better to tailor its prohibitions to the demands of different sports. As things are, a number

of sporting organizations, including Major League Baseball and the National Football League, have yet to sign up to the WADA code since they feel it is ill-suited to their needs.

Mr. Murray is second to none in his knowledge of sports doping, and he does an excellent job of exploring the many challenges it raises. He failed to convince me, however, that some uniform notion of unnatural drugs can be applied across the board. A system that is more sensitive to the problems of different sports (and perhaps that lightened up on the recreational drugs) would have a better chance of general acceptance. It might also make the lives of the athletes a little less hard.

Mr. Papineau is a professor of philosophy at King's College London and the City University of New York. He is the author of "Knowing the Score."