CORRESPONDENCE

To the Editor:

Dear Sir,

AMATEUR ROWING ASSOCIATION: RANDOM DRUGS TESTING WINTER 1981/82

In 1981 The Sports Council was keen to encourage the Governing Bodies of Sport to involve themselves more in drug testing. Five cases of drug abuse had been detected by FISA (the Governing Body of International Rowing) in the previous 2 years involving Russian and Bulgarian rowers. Therefore in September, 1981 the IRC (International Rowing Committee of the ARA) approved its Chairman Peter Coni's scheme to carry out random drug tests during the following winter. The Sports Council had agreed to fund 100% of the cost of the testing programme.

The IRC did not believe there to be any deliberate use of prohibited drugs amongst any British rowers. The aim was to determine beyond reasonable doubt whether there was any use of prohibited drugs in British International rowing and to bring home to competitors the danger that normal medicaments may contain prohibited substances which would put them at risk in international competition. The scheme would also provide a demonstration of the potential of random drugs testing which might encourage other governing bodies to consider the problem more closely.

The scheme involved testing ten different rowers each month from November until March. Each month the selection of the subjects to be tested was decided upon by Mr. P. Coni and Dr. P. Thomas from all potential members of the Great Britain men's, women's and men's light weight crews and also a selection of those who rowed in 1980 and 1981 in the junior teams and were likely to be in a senior GB team in a further year or two. The tests were carried out by Dr. P. Thomas following the lines of the FISA procedure. For men the urine was passed in his presence and for the women either a chaperone was present or the woman was searched before entering the WC. Only 24 hours notice was given and some rowers were tested more than once. 100 ml of urine was collected into a bottle and then this sample was divided into two equal parts. The bottles were sealed in individual containers and sent to Dr. Cowan at the Drug Control Centre, Chelsea College, London, for analysis.

Each athlete tested was required to specify any drugs taken within the previous 48 hours, and these were listed on the form signed by the athlete and the doctor at the completion of each sample when divided and sealed. Details of any declared drugs accompanied the samples to Chelsea College to assist Dr. Cowan in the conclusions he reached from the analytical process.

RESULTS

Out of the 50 tests, two were too small to analyse with the normal certainty. A further sample gave a suspected positive for injected anabolic steroid in the initial screening process but the small volume of urine in the bottle was insufficient to enable this possibility to be confirmed or refuted. It was decided to use the second bottle to complete the analysis of the sample knowing that if the result was positive the rower would not have a spare bottle which could be analysed independently. The further analysis showed that the sample was clear of all prohibited substances. One rower had declared that Lemsip, Night Nurse, Beechams Powders and Gee's Linctus had been taken for a head cold and diarrhoea. The sample contained codeine which was suspected to have come from an additional preparation which the rower forgot to declare.

DISCUSSION

The difficulty of obtaining a 100 ml sample before a morning training session soon became apparent. Most rowers had to pass urine at home on rising even though they knew a sample was required at the training location. A minimum of 2 hours after a training session was often required before a suitable sample could be collected.

One rower had influenza on the day chosen for the test but the test was nevertheless taken. It was felt necessary to insist on the test in order to be certain that the rower was not trying to avoid the check.

Because a few of the drugs prohibited in a competition are widely used by doctors and can be bought over the counter for legitimate treatment, the finding of substances other than anabolic steroids should not lead automatically to a suspension. If testing of athletes is to be undertaken in the training season at random, new laws are required clearly stating which drugs are permitted in the training period.

Yours faithfully,

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Formerly Hon. Med. Officer, ARA

This report was first prepared for us late in 1982 — Editor