



HEALTH PROTECTION IN TRAINING AND COMPETITION

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Sports are all about athletes. We are here because of them and for them. When we talk about a sportsperson, the image that immediately comes to mind is one of a strong, fit, healthy individual. This goes for many athletes, but unfortunately some are not that lucky. Training and competition techniques and programmes have become so advanced that some athletes go to extreme limits to achieve their goals, with no regard for the consequences on their well-being.

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) has put the health of the athletes at the forefront of its priorities. Initially with the creation of its Medical Commission, which took a lot of positive steps to ensure that the athletes' health is well protected.

When we talk about health protection for the athletes, some of us think only of injury prevention during training and competition, but in fact, what we also need to consider is how to protect the psychological, mental and social well-being of the athlete.

The IOC has taken a lot of initiative but we need to acknowledge that it's not a task for one single entity; a holistic approach to the well-being of athletes must be achieved through the cooperation among, and integration of, many levels of management within the sports system, including coaches, trainers, physicians, sports psychologists, nutritionists, parents, and agents.

This ideal situation is not yet in place but we hope that, with all the efforts being made to come up with guidelines for each area, athletes' health will be protected even more than we had originally sought.

As a member of the IOC Medical Commission, I have attended many workshops and seminars that aim to better understand how we can help athletes, and create an atmosphere where they can train and compete with minimal risks to their health. The Medical Commission has issued many documents in support of a healthier lifestyle for the athlete. Initially, before the creation of the World Anti-Doping Agency

(WADA), the IOC Medical Commission created the Anti-Doping Code and the Prohibited List, which was its way of stating how harmful drug use is to the athletes, on both the physical and ethical level. This task was then assigned to WADA, which put together the World Anti-Doping Code that we all use today.

The IOC Medical Commission shifted its focus to all the other items on the agenda. It successfully created the IOC Medical Guidelines, so that everyone in the Olympic Movement medical field could work under the same rules.

Several topics were undertaken in depth, by using experts from all over the world and issuing consensus statements. These topics included sudden death in sport and the risk of cardiovascular disease in high level athletes. Other consensus statements focused on specific health risks that young female athletes may encounter as a result of rigorous exercise, namely the female athlete triad.

During discussions on the Medical Guidelines, it was noted that, for all health risks encountered, early detection and prevention (rather than cure) is important and can reveal risk factors and pre-existing conditions, which can influence an athlete's ability to assess the likelihood of injury free participation. We are now looking into ways to better educate our athletes, coaches, trainers and team physicians.

Of mention is the consensus statement that referred to strategies to better protect young professional athletes' health during their competition years, with the help of the International Federations (IFs).

And finally, two more topics: 1) fasting in all its forms during competition or training and its effect on athletes' health, which was discussed within an expert group workshop and led to many recommendations; 2) the development of policies against sexual harassment and abuse in sport.

In my opinion, the key to the success of the IOC's policies, regarding all issues concerning athletes, is the strong belief in the athletes themselves. Athletes are well represented within every commission of the IOC, which gives a direct insight into what athletes are looking for, what they need and what is a better atmosphere for them to excel in. The fifth International Athletes' Forum presented several topics and recommendations, which were all adopted by the IOC Executive Board, and for which we thank them.

In my opinion, the most important way forward is to create rules that regulate competition in a way that protects the athletes' health and body, integrity, and constantly promotes the idea of healthy participation in sport.

Being involved in the activities of the IOC since 2002, I have a strong belief that the IOC will continue: to enforce its zero tolerance policy against drug use in sport; to ensure that testing standards are at a high level for both team and individual sports; to stand by its commitment to take sports off the Olympic programme if they have not applied the World Anti-Doping Code; to ensure that out-of-competition testing is also carried out as this is an essential element of any effective anti-doping programme; to ensure that athletes are taken care in all aspects including psychologically, emotionally and physically; and to ensure that athletes continue to give us their insights into what they see is the best way forward.