

Don't be a dope! The scourge of drugs in sport is everybody's problem

Published 14/02/17 by [Blake Richardson](#)

WADA lab

- Most coaches and amateur athletes choose to remain in the dark over the perils of doping.
- Coaches can choose to be part of the solution or part of the problem.
- The majority of failed drug tests outside of elite sport are attributable to the use of supplements.
- Coaches should endeavour to provide their athletes with help and guidance on doping and use of supplements, and instil in them values that reflect the *ethos*, integrity and rules of their sport.
- Governing bodies also have a responsibility to educate coaches and athletes by publicising and signposting relevant online resources.

It is the responsibility of coaches and athletes of all levels and abilities to expand their knowledge of banned substances and supplements. Too many are burying their heads in the sand by endorsing the view that performance-enhancing drugs are a headache exclusive to the professional arena.

‘I don't think your average athlete has got a clue about doping, because most club coaches don't know much about it themselves. They haven't been properly educated.’

This is the frank and damning assessment of ConnectedCoaches member [Barry Farquhar](#), a Level 3 triathlon coach and UK Anti-Doping (UKAD) Accredited Advisor.

‘Hardly anyone bothers to look at the information provided by UKAD and WADA (the World Anti-Doping Agency), and almost no one talks about it outside of elite/professional and media circles.’

More incriminating insight into the indifference towards doping among coaches and athletes, this time from fellow UKAD Accredited Advisor and ConnectedCoaches member [Ian Tunnicliffe](#), a Level 2 cycling coach.

The pair are intent on cranking up the interest levels among the coaching fraternity by providing a well-intentioned prod in the ribs.

The need for enlightenment is great, as WADA relies on the buy-in and assistance of coaches to help harmonise the anti-doping message and promote its policies.

‘The most important thing, I think, is dialogue,’ says Ian. ‘We must get coaches to accept that they are part of the solution or part of the problem, and that it is their choice as to which route they take. By not doing anything, they are part of the problem, without a doubt.’

There is now an added urgency for sports coaches to become more informed on the dangers of performance-enhancing drugs in sport, for since 1 January 2015, a change to the [WADA code](#) means coaches could be accused of complicity if they have a strong suspicion one of their athletes has taken a banned substance, and do not report their concerns.

Point nine in the 10-point WADA Anti-Doping Rule Violations (ADRV) list states:

Complicity: assisting, encouraging, aiding, abetting, conspiring, covering up or any other type of intentional complicity involving an ADRV or any attempted ADRV.

‘It is no longer solely the responsibility of the athlete to know what they are putting into their body. The whole support network, including coaches, are now part of that process,’ says Barry. ‘It has been a long time coming.’

An ethical shift

[WADA](#) hoped this amendment would provide the stimulus for coaches and athletes to shake off their disinterest, and scrutinise more carefully the rules and regulations set out in the code.

But Barry is not so sure it is having the desired effect of serving as a deterrent for detachment.

Most athletes, and a lot of coaches, have never set eyes on the universal [‘Prohibited List’](#) of banned *substances*.

‘I still don’t think coaches are fully aware of the ramifications of not providing adequate support,’ says Barry.

‘They need to know that it is no longer enough to say, “It’s nothing to do with me, I didn’t tell the athlete to take the supplement.”’

Ian has taken a gentler approach. Still fairly new to the role, he says he did not want to steam in and ‘poke people on the forehead, saying you must do this or that’.

His view is that athletes should take full responsibility for what they put in their bodies.

‘The [100% Me](#) programme is there to educate athletes on why it is important to have clean sport, and states that, if you compete at any level, you have to make absolutely certain you are 100% clean and within the rules.’

‘So while I promote clean competition, make sure my athletes are fully aware of the regulations and endeavour to give them guidance and the right ethos, particularly the teenagers, ultimately, the athletes are not with me 24/7. I don’t put them to bed, feed them and wake them up on a morning.’

In other words, the buck should stop with them.

‘The danger is that we take some of the responsibility away from the individual,’ adds Ian. ‘That is not what 100% Me is about, it is about saying to yourself as an athlete, “I do the right things, and I want to be clean.”’

‘I see the role of Accredited Advisor as passive – waiting for people to come and talk to us – but it is also proactive. We are saying to parents, athlete support personnel and coaches: “Find out about all the information that is available, and make sure the people that you work with are educated about it.”’

Better direction needed

Barry believes that governing bodies too have a responsibility to do more to drive the debate on doping, including facilitating the acquisition of knowledge and providing useful online signposting.

‘I have never been encouraged to attend a course by any of the governing bodies I have been associated with,’ says Barry. ‘I became a UKAD Accredited Advisor more for my own development, as coaching is my full-time job, it’s what I do.’

‘My other half competes as a Great Britain age-group triathlete so I want to know what I am advising her, as well as my other athletes.’

‘There is that whole education side missing, and I just don’t think it has been underlined enough by governing bodies.’

‘At Level 1 in triathlon, we don’t talk about doping, or the ramifications as a coach of the doping spectrum. This may be due to the idea that this level of coach will be under the supervision of a more experienced coach. However, it is often this level that your average club athlete has most contact with.’

‘I know that British Triathlon have introduced a module through their online hub for the Level 2 qualification, which is subsequently used to initiate discussion during the course. However, I am still not convinced there is enough emphasis. There is a statement on the final section on the hub encouraging coaches to undertake further learning through the [UKAD](#) and WADA websites. However, these are not a mandatory element for qualification.’

Barry Farquhar

Barry Farquhar competing for Great Britain in the 2015 Weymouth ETU Challenge Long Distance Triathlon European Championships

'Code' of silence

Ian says club athletes typically regard doping concerns as an irrelevance.

He agrees with Barry that the subject is rarely discussed in community circles, despite it being a perpetual hot topic in the national media.

'In my experience, the biggest issues around doping are fuelled by the lack of discussion and the attitude among non-elite athletes (and coaches) that "it doesn't apply to me as I don't take drugs, and I'll never be tested anyway,"' he says.

'It's not like UKAD and WADA don't make all of the information available, it's just that hardly anyone bothers to look at it.

'Yet even a quick glance at the inadvertent doping figures shows that the majority of failures are attributable to the use of supplements.'

Ian is passionate about promoting clean competition and keen to shed light on the grey areas that create confusion among athletes and coaches.

And grey patches certainly do abound. There are more grey areas in doping than there are over the Cumbrian fells on a particularly overcast winter's day, meaning the layman, crucially, remains in the dark over issues relevant to them.

There are a wealth of online videos designed to provide some clarity, and offering words of warning regarding supplements that may contain banned ingredients.

The one below explains how easy it is to fall foul of over-the-counter products, which may be contaminated with banned substances in the manufacturing process.

There is a need for simplicity and succinctness in spreading the message. Due to different rules for different sports and different rules for different levels of competition, coaches and athletes complain they are often bamboozled by layer upon layer of confusing complexity, not helped by the sprinkling of medical terminology and acronyms.

Barry agrees that, in the world of anti-doping, nothing is black and white.

‘Your average gym user who has no interest in competing for GB as an age-grouper or as a professional athlete can walk into Holland and Barrett or even Tesco’s and pick up a wide raft of substances, and use those substances, which are perfectly acceptable in modern society. But for a professional athlete or a GB age-grouper, they are actually not permitted.

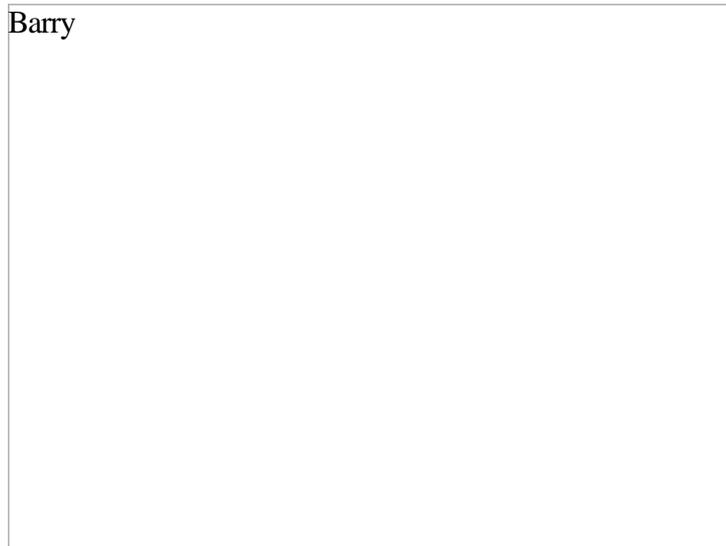
‘A lot of people get on their high horse when they hear of professional athletes doping, but they are probably doping as well because of that naivety of thinking doping is just taking substances like EPO or steroid abuse.’

Rather than relying on supplements, Ian is a big advocate of eating natural products, sleeping well and getting plenty of rest, impressing this mantra on all his athletes, along with the warning never to underestimate the risk associated with taking supplements.

These concentrated sources of nutrients are unregulated, and as such, you don’t know what you are putting into your system.

‘There is a list of ingredients on the sides of bottles and packets, but half of it makes no sense to me and then, of course, there is what’s not listed.

‘Athletes must remember that, if you don’t know for sure you are clean, you are always at risk that at some point you might fall foul of the regulations, because any athlete who is competing, particularly at national level, can at any time be requested to take a drug test. And the only time you find you are not compliant is when you fail the test. So why put yourself at risk?’



Barry puts one of his athletes through their paces

Keep it clean

As a UKAD Accredited Advisor, Ian wants to provide the coaching sector at all levels, not just high performance, with guidance and information, while informing athletes and their support team about the values of clean sport.

‘My advice to athletes would be to find out who your Accredited Advisor is and get to know them a bit. Because they will be able to provide you with more information and guidance. I’m not going to take on responsibility for them as an athlete, but if they have any questions or queries, then I will be there for them to talk to.’

Athletes who inadvertently fall foul of the rules only have themselves to blame for failing to educate themselves on the real and present danger of drugs in sport, says Ian.

They cannot use hindsight, or a lack of it, to justify their behaviour, or mitigate the punishment meted out.

Try turning hindsight into insight, and then there will be no chance of your life being turned upside down by a failed drugs test.

‘It is important to impress on athletes that, if you aren’t clean, someone is going to take everything away from you,’ says Ian.

‘I have a 13-year-old boy who is extraordinary, and a 15-year-old girl who has just got on to the Olympic programme. I am optimistic she could one day become a world champion. How marvellous would that be? But if they or others are found out to be doping so early on in their careers, purely and simply because of a lack of knowledge, a lack of guidance, it would be catastrophic.’

‘Look at Lance Armstrong, who now has no wins to his credit after having them all taken away from him. There are long-lasting consequences. It’s not just the competition itself that is wiped off your record, you could be hit with a two-year ban, four-year ban or longer.’

Crime and punishment

Barry believes that, at present, the punishment does not fit the crime for those found guilty of doping at amateur level.

The fact is, non-elite athletes are rarely drug tested and, as a result, many who transgress are not being caught. When they **are** brought to justice, the ensuing suspension does not send out the necessary zero-tolerance message that will act as a deterrent to others who may be contemplating subverting the rules.

‘I don’t think enough is being done at grass-roots level to catch people out,’ says Barry. ‘There should be more testing. The risk of being caught at age-group level is very, very slim.’

‘And the likelihood is you will get a two-year suspension if found guilty. But all it means is that you move up an age-group when you are back competing.’

The upshot is that, for some people, taking a banned substance is a gamble worth taking.

‘You have to be selfish as an athlete, and you sacrifice a lot of family time and social time so there is a lot of pressure on people to succeed and to make the sacrifices worthwhile. It is seen as an acceptable risk.’

‘And then, because some people don’t have a coach, they will invariably say in their defence that they didn’t know the substance was banned.’

Is there a serious problem with performance-enhancing drugs at national age-group level? Barry thinks there is.

‘Some of the performances are borderline impossible,’ he says. ‘Whether that is by taking substances that are technically legal, or because rules aren’t as tight on testing as they should be, I don’t know.’

‘The fact that you don’t require a TUE (therapeutic use exemption) as an age-group athlete, for example, means that, even on the European or world stage, it leaves things open to abuse.

‘It comes down to this understanding and acceptance of the risk. The reality is, the chances of a GB age-group athlete being dope tested at a competition is probably fairly slim, unless you are stood on the very top of the podium.’

Follow the signposts

The message Barry and Ian are eager to impress on coaches is that ‘we are not alone’. [UKAD](#) and [WADA](#) do not operate with the sole stipulation of banning individuals in violation of the code. Their mission is to protect people’s right to participate in clean sport, and to offer advice and guidance that will hopefully prevent athletes, coaches or support staff from falling foul of the rules.

There is no excuse for ignoring the danger signs. If an athlete comes to you seeking advice, or if you have your suspicions aroused, **don’t fail the test**.

Next steps

Here are some invaluable websites to educate coaches on doping in sport:

- [Global Drug Reference Online \(Global DRO\)](#): provides athletes and support personnel with information about the prohibited status of specific medications or supplements.
- [Informed-Sport: A quality assurance programme for sports nutrition products and suppliers](#). It certifies that nutritional supplements and/or ingredients have been screened for substances banned in sport by WADA, carrying the [Informed-Sport logo](#).
- [Coach Clean: eLearning course for coaches who want to know more about clean sport and understand their own responsibilities with regard to anti-doping](#). Endorsed by UK Coaching (formerly Sports Coach UK).
- [100% Me: Online resource that supports, informs and educates athletes by providing anti-doping advice and guidance](#).
- [UKAD Accredited Advisor: Click here to enrol on the UK Anti-Doping Accredited Advisor course](#).

[Here on ConnectedCoaches](#), we have set up a [Drugs in sport](#) forum area within the Welcome and General [Group](#). Here, you can start conversations around the use of drugs at all levels of sport. We have some members, like Barry and Ian, who are UKAD Accredited Advisors, and they will be keen to share their knowledge.

This blog is also available as a podcast on a number of platforms including Itunes. [Listen here](#).

Login to follow, share, comment and participate. Not a member? [Join for free now](#).

tags : anti-doping, doping, drugs, ukad, wada