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Ethically Modified Athletes

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Abstract

The emergence of gene doping should mark a new paradigm for anti-doping policy makers, because it presents a new landscape of ethical issues and concerns. This position does not suggest genetic exceptionalism, but speaks specifically to the moral ambivalence surrounding genetics, describing the ethical issues as rather more unresolved than one might say for doping more generally. My position explores a number of arguments surrounding the ethics of gene doping, particularly the cultural political context of the human genome project, which itself draws on literary narratives and media coverage on the subject.

As a substantive response to the ethics of gene doping, I question the claims that it would compromise an athlete's natural status or that it would constitute cheating, arguing that these conclusions commit essentialist errors that disguise a more entrenched aesthetic rejection of the genetically modified athlete that is founded on moral panic. Moreover, I suggest that interpreting the genetically modified athlete through these narratives – as the mutant, superhuman or monster – invites a moral discourse that frames the technology as illegitimate, limiting its capacity to be understood as a positive use of medicine, either within sport or outside of it. Yet, this objection must wrestle with the positive contribution of technological change in medicine and the possibility that genomics could confer a competitive advantage through therapeutic application alone, such as through attending to athletic injuries.

I argue that the moral tension caused by performance enhancing drugs in sport reflects the crisis of authenticity in contemporary society, specifically, the demise of the natural human and the widespread ambivalence about this. Fair play and health are secondary matters in this debate and, yet, they dominate, in part because they lend themselves to an artificial, but sincere moral intuitionism and paternalism that remains part of elite sporting culture. Yet, considerable clarification is needed on what constitutes the genetically modified athlete. Are we interested only in the somatic-cell doper, who themselves consent to using gene transfer to gain an edge over a competitor, or someone who inadvertently becomes 'better than well' through the same kind of use in a therapeutic context? Alternatively, are we interested in the athlete who has been born from parents that have, themselves, been modified? Lastly, does the ethical debate take into account the child born from parents who select a form of enhancement for their child, or perhaps select their preferred embryo on the basis of its propensity for elite sports competition?

While each of these issues varies in relevance to present debates on anti-doping, they are all imbued with similar philosophical concerns about the human condition and the degree to which gene transfer can alter this. The ethical debate must take into account the risks to vulnerable groups, such as children or athletes who enhance because they feel coerced and the liberties of adults who make lifestyle decisions about body modification. Yet, it must also consider the limits of ethical policy making within the world of sport and the relationship of this to broader structures of ethical governance within society. When considering what should be the strategy for anti-doping officials in relation to gene doping, it is necessary to return to fundamental philosophical and moral questions about the value of sport, consider how these values might have changed, and recognise the broader bioethical context within which decisions about medical technology are made. This requires that elite sports organisations re-evaluate established systems of rewarding excellence, in order to promote a moral climate in sport that takes into account inherent natural and social inequalities, which are constitutive of sports practices. As some attempt to develop such a system within anti-doping, I conclude by advancing a position that argues for a public engagement with ethics. This argument draws on recent debates within the public understanding of science, which argue for *upstream* engagement. Moreover, it emphasises the importance of developing skills of moral reasoning within educational strategies, rather than just finding more effective ways of conveying the risks and technical details of doping. The World Anti-Doping Agency should not be burdened with the sole responsibility of leading such

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debates. However, its role as an ethically motivated institution can enable broader social structures and institutions to contribute to its policies.

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