



Drug testing in sport

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WENDY M GROSSMAN HAS THE STRAIGHT DOPE

A couple of years ago, the London Skeptics in the Pub fielded Mark Burnley, from the University of Aberystwyth, to talk about doping in sports. His main contention: modern doping is such a highly technical, complicated matter that there's no way athletes have the expertise to devise the necessary regimen. Modern doping, he concluded, is not possible without the support of medical personnel, physiotherapists and chemists, and for anti-doping enforcement to be effective it has to go up the line from the athletes to those personnel. And, he said, systematic doping has been uncovered by whistleblowers and law enforcement, not through testing.

Modern histories of doping in sport tend to start in 1988 when the International Olympic Committee convened a press conference to announce that the Canadian sprinter Ben Johnson had tested positive for the drug stanozolol and would be stripped of his gold medal. That race, in which almost all of the eight leading contenders

were eventually linked to drugs, is now known as “the dirtiest race in history”. Ever since, there's been an arms race between the dopers and the testers; it's generally agreed that testing only catches people who are stupid or made a mistake.

The 2002 Balco scandal, in which a California-based laboratory was found to be making “designer” steroids – that is steroids specifically designed to be undetectable by then-current testing – proved both the existence of the arms race and the point Burnley was making. Its products were not caught by testing, but by a whistleblower sending in a syringe with enough of the drug in it to launch a US federal investigation. Sure, the authorities can test for Balco's THG steroid now, and the anti-doping codes are written to explicitly outlaw substances with similar effects to the listed ones, but smart dopers have moved on.

Another year, another sport: I could never understand how people didn't just naturally assume Lance Armstrong was doping. He was winning, year after year, the toughest race in a