

Doping in Kenya: Are we too deep?

Kenya's excellence in running has in the recent years been tainted by cases of doping. Rita Jeptoo, a triple winner of the Boston and Chicago marathons tested positive for the blood-boosting agent EPO. Matthew Kisorio, the other elite runner to be banned, claimed that doping is widespread among Kenyan runners and that doping doctors have set up shop in Kenya's athletics belt for their business. Asbel Kiprop, a multiple world champion in 1500m tested for EPO leading to his retirement from athletics despite his claims that his sample had been interfered with.

A WADA report released in September 2018 revealed that 1, 138 Kenyan athletes had tested positive for prohibited substances, 113 of them during competitions between 200 and 1st August 2018. The report stated that the doping practices of Kenyan athletes are 'unsophisticated, opportunistic and uncoordinated and there is no evidence of an institutionalized system.' This is unlike Russia which was found to have systematic and state -sponsored doping in 2015. This does not save face in any way because officials have estimated the number of positive cases at between 49 and 52 among elite athletes within the last four years. A majority have tested for EPO and Nandrolone which were administered by medical personnel in some cases, either intentionally or inadvertently. This is certainly a grim picture.

Further, some IAAF officials in the past have been suspended for seeking bribes from affected athletes to conceal the adverse analytical findings. These include the late Isaiah Kiplagat who was the former AK President and the now banned Vice President, David Okeyo. The CEO Isaac Mwangi was also suspended for allegedly soliciting bribes from two female sprinters who had tested positive at the Beijing Olympics in 2015 in exchange for reduced bans.

This vice had become so deeply entrenched that the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) threatened to put in place sanctions that could bar its athletes from participating in the 2016 Rio Olympics. WADA had requested Kenya to pass legislation and provide adequate funding towards anti-doping for some time before the threat of a ban became apparent.

In a Doping Task Force report presented to the then Cabinet Secretary in charge of Sports in 2015, that many sports federations do not have elaborate programmes on education/awareness and testing in doping with a focus on soccer, athletics and rugby.

Way Forward

As a result, the Anti-Doping Act was enacted by Parliament to provide a framework for the implementation of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization Convention Against Doping in Sport. This piece of legislation established the Anti-Doping Agency of Kenya (ADAK). This is the body tasked with among other functions to: conduct sensitization and awareness campaigns in form of outreach programs during sports competitions as well as conducting deliberate workshops to share anti-doping information with key target groups; research on anti-doping assists the Agency to strategically address and curb issues that propagate doping in sports; and to organize programs that are 'value based' in order to instill values as embedded by the 'spirit of sport' to children under 16 years by partnering with Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD). ADAK needs all the funding and support from all stakeholders as it really is at the forefront in curbing this menace. Further, there is need to ensure its independence so that it fully carries out its mandate under law.

In addition, a WADA accredited laboratory launched in Nairobi in August 2018, the first of its kind in East Africa. The lab will analyse samples collected from athletes across the region. This is seen as a major step in the fight against doping.

Despite the above, it is noteworthy that sometimes doping is accidental or happens due to lack of adequate information by the stakeholders. This starts right from the team doctors, sportspeople, team management, coaches and others. There is need for widespread and deliberate education and awareness on doping.

Further, there is need to have strict disciplinary action against all officials who dope sportspeople in sports including lifetime bans. To ensure increased checks and balances on coaches and managers, there needs to be periodical screening before renewal of licences for both local and especially foreign coaches.

In conclusion, despite what appears to be an alarming rise in doping cases by sportspeople in Kenya, if the steps above are considered and implemented to the letter, I foresee this vice becoming a thing of the past in the next few years. We must avoid entrenching it as part of our sports culture in Kenya.

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