



“The closer I am, the more it hurts”:

An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Clean Athlete Experiences of the Impact of Doping on Their Career



MISSION

- Give voice to self-identified clean athletes to speak about their experiences of competing against athletes who have been proven or perceived to have doped.
- Provide athlete-informed insights to shape effective, fair, and credible anti-doping policies and anti-doping education initiatives.



RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- Explore self-identified clean athletes' development from youth to senior Olympic level and make sense of how this may have influenced their decision to remain clean.
- Explore self-identified clean athletes' experience of competing against individuals who (may have) doped including making sense of the tangible and intangible impact doping has had across their career.



METHODOLOGY

- Athlete-centred study using a qualitative research approach.
- One to one life-story interviews conducted by an athlete co-researcher.
- Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to explore how individuals make sense of their experiences.



PARTICIPANTS

- Eight British Olympic Middle (800m to 3000m) to Long Distance (3000m and above) runners
- Average age: 39 years.
- Sex distribution: 50% male, 50% female.
- Purposeful sampling ensured the participants had shared backgrounds as British international athletes in middle and/or long-distance athletics who were known to have competed against athletes who had doped.



FINDINGS

The impacts are widespread... long-lasting, and painful

- Tangible impacts include the loss of medals, prize money, funding, race opportunities, qualifications, and sponsorship.
- Intangible aspects include loss of enjoyment, pushing too hard in training, and questioning of oneself.
- Some had lost £100,000s in prize money and there is a lack of retrospective payment of lost prize money.
- Pain and loss of enjoyment in the sport is paired with an anger that fundamental values of sport were being challenged.
- Doping conversations are impossible to escape; athletes have sleepless nights over a decade on from races impacted by doping.
- Competitors' doping placed a potential limit in clean athletes' minds as to what may be possible for them when racing.

The closer it is, the more it hurts

- Finishing closer to medals in which dopers or potential dopers were in front would hurt more than if an athlete finished lower down a field (4th versus 24th).
- The thought of British athletes - who were close in geographical proximity to the participants - intentionally doping was 'horrifying'.
- The potential of a close peer or friend having cheated brought out heightened emotions - bitterness, disappointment, and 'hatred, tinged with jealousy' that a potentially doped athlete had been achieved what the clean athlete desired.
- At the closest level, the self, athletes were terrified of having a contamination case or missing a test. There was palpable clean anxiety.

Athletes know when something doesn't look or feel right

- Among peers athletes openly discuss other competitors who had been, or were potentially, doping.
- Rapid jumps in performance, high levels of consistency, and performances perceived as 'abnormal' or 'nonsense' were all seen as signs of an athlete potentially doping.
- Clean athletes know what it takes to reach a certain level and struggle to comprehend how 'unbelievable' performances are anything other than a sign of doping.

The love of hard work and fairness are the essence of sport, and doping deeply undermines this

- Athletes vocalised their love and enjoyment of hard work, expecting high standards of themselves and those around as they pursued personal excellence.
- External recognition for performances was seen as a marker of appreciation of the hard work in training.
- Doping was seen as deeply undermining of the essence of sport, a shortcut to success and unfair, making it incredibly jarring for clean athletes.



NEXT STEPS

The analysis will be finalised and written-up in a peer-reviewed journal article and findings will inform the next phases of the project:

- WP4: Policy Recommendations - Formulate comprehensive policy recommendations ensuring transparent, consistent reintegration practices, promoting fairness, athlete well-being, and the integrity of sports governance.
- WP5: Education Initiatives - Develop athlete-informed educational materials utilising insights gained from WP2 & 3, integrating authentic stories to foster effective doping prevention.



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