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Sharing the blame: Complicity, conspiracy, and collective responsibility in sport

Sarah Teetzel

Abstract

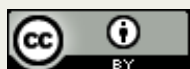
While it is difficult to classify an athlete's participation in sport as solely an individual or a collective act, it is easy to make the case that there are both public and private dimensions to sport. Similarly, one can view the athletes competing in a sporting event from the reductionist perspective that sees them as individuals performing their own distinct roles, or from the collective perspective, which identifies them as a group seeking a common goal. However, an examination of athletes caught using performance-enhancing drugs and procedures banned by the World Anti-Doping Agency shows that when it comes to doping in sport, the neater, simpler, and more convenient reductionist position often replaces the collective view and places the blame almost entirely on the individual athlete. Unquestionably, the athlete makes the final decision to deposit a banned substance in his or her body and is therefore causally responsible for failing a doping detection test. But, I will argue, causal responsibility is not an essential component of complicitous responsibility. Only in the rarest of cases could an athlete research what drugs would be most effective, manufacture the performance-enhancing drugs, and make use of them without the assistance of his or her coaches, trainers, sports medicine advisors, therapists, or other support personnel. Hence, the relationships between the athlete who takes the banned substances and the people who make them available to the athlete are important. I argue that these people together form a collective and are complicitous to the act of doping, which should render them all socially and morally accountable for the act. Except in the most scandalous doping cases where an athlete's positive test result grabs the media's attention and the ensuing public outcry demands that all involved be held accountable, the professionals and ancillary workers who develop, produce, distribute, and condone the use of banned substances are overlooked in favour of blaming the athlete. The collective does not share the responsibility but instead places it entirely on the athlete. In this paper, I argue that the participatory intentions of the athlete's support personnel make them complicit to the act and therefore partially accountable for the doping offence. Drawing on Christopher Kutz and Margaret Gilbert's accounts of shared intentions and collective responsibility, I argue that the group members' participatory intentions warrant holding the entire group responsible. The implication of this view is that doping is a collective act, rather than an individual one, and anti-doping officials should focus more on the complicitous nature of doping.

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