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Whose Job is it Anyway? A Qualitative Investigation into the Influence of Agents, Race Organisers, and Sponsors on the Risk of Doping in Elite Distance Running

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Abstract

Agents, race-organisers, and sponsors have a key influence in shaping the world of elite professional distance running. Yet to date this important but hard-to-reach stakeholder group has been omitted from the global research landscape of doping and anti-doping. The purpose of this study is to address this gap in the literature and explore the systematic contributors to doping in elite long-distance running, along with potential solutions to this issue, from this influential perspective. Thirteen in-depth interviews were conducted with agents ($n = 8$) of world-class long-distance runners, major race organisers ($n = 3$), and sports marketing managers for global brands ($n = 2$). The interviews were conducted via the phone, audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim. Reflexive thematic analysis generated three themes which focused on: 1) The framework of professional distance running and the contextual aspects which may contribute to doping risk, 2) the impact of various recruitment strategies on doping and anti-doping, and 3) the lessons that can be learnt from the participants' first-hand experiences with doping cases and/or managing anti-doping requirements. Reflecting on the sector rather than the sample, the results highlighted that not all commercial stakeholders feel responsible for anti-doping. Collective responsibility from all stakeholders, which is currently borne by some and not others, is necessary to minimise doping in distance running. The challenge is how to convince all stakeholders of their share of the responsibility.

Keywords: anti-doping, elite sport, athletics, athlete representatives, sponsor, product endorsement

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Within athletics, distance running and road running account for the highest relative proportion of Anti-Doping Rule Violations (ADRVs) (Aguillar-Navarro *et al.* 2021). Professional distance running over the past 25 years has been dominated by Kenyan and Ethiopian athletes (Nikolaidis *et al.* 2017). Physiological, genetic, and/or biomechanical factors may all contribute to this domination (Larsen and Sheel 2015, Tucker *et al.* 2015) and certainly the annual world rankings for distance running events indicate an enormous talent pool in Kenya, Ethiopia, and more recently Uganda. There may also be social factors behind their success, such as high motivation to achieve economic success (Jarvie and Sikes 2012), and environmental factors, such as abundant high-altitude locations with year-round favourable weather for training (Wilber and Pitsiladis 2012). However, some now feel that doping may also be contributing to this success, because Kenyan runners have been frequently charged with ADRVs in recent years. At the time of this study, 61 Kenyan distance runners were serving bans for ADRVs (Athletics Integrity Unit: Global List of Ineligible Persons). Ethiopian and Ugandan distance runners have also been implicated, albeit to a lesser extent, with 13 Ethiopian and 2 Ugandan athletes on the global list of ineligible persons. Placing these numbers in context, a minimum of 196 athletes were suspended for ADRVs in 2020 (Athletics Integrity Unit: Global List of Ineligible Persons). Further detailed statistics are offered in Supplementary material 1.

The relatively high number of sanctions in Kenya and Ethiopia points to influences beyond intra-individual factors (Blank *et al.* 2016, Ntoumanis *et al.* 2014). Instead, it suggests systemic issues in the athletes' environment. The influence of various individuals within an athlete's environment on doping risk has been studied previously, from peers in team sports (Allen *et al.* 2017, Aubel *et al.* 2019, Mallia *et al.* 2016), to coaches (Barnes *et al.* 2022), parents (Erickson *et al.* 2017), physicians (Backhouse and McKenna 2011), and other athlete support personnel (Barkoukis *et al.* 2019, Mazanov *et al.* 2014). The importance of

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the athlete environment on doping behaviour has long been recognised in academic research (Hauw 2013, Hauw and Mohamed 2015, Shelley *et al.* 2021, Petróczi *et al.* 2017, 2021).

However, one aspect which is often taken for granted in empirical investigations into doping and anti-doping is what constitutes ‘the system’. The question of what are the boundaries of the athlete environment that exerts an influence on the athlete’s choices and actions when it comes to rule-breaking or rule-following, has rarely been addressed.

Setting up this exploratory study, we generally worked from a socio-ecological perspective. Whilst an athlete’s primary support is important, in elite distance running, and some other professional sports such as professional road cycling, triathlon and boxing, there are other individuals who may play an equally important role in shaping doping risk. Adopting McLeroy and colleagues’ model (1988), Figure 1 depicts a multi-level socio-ecological system of anti-doping that surrounds athletes in professional sports where athlete representatives (agents), race or event organisers, and sponsors (collectively ‘commercial stakeholders’) are integral parts of the athlete environment. This conceptualisation goes beyond the athlete’s direct environment of team-mates, friends, family, and the typical entourage of coaches, doctors, physiotherapists, nutritionists, psychologists, and lifestyle coaches, and includes another personal layer representing the business aspects of their sport, before the macro level of institutions, federations, and global policies. This extended scope raises a different viewpoint, namely how responsibility for clean sport and anti-doping compliance might look like beyond the athletes’ strict liability rule.

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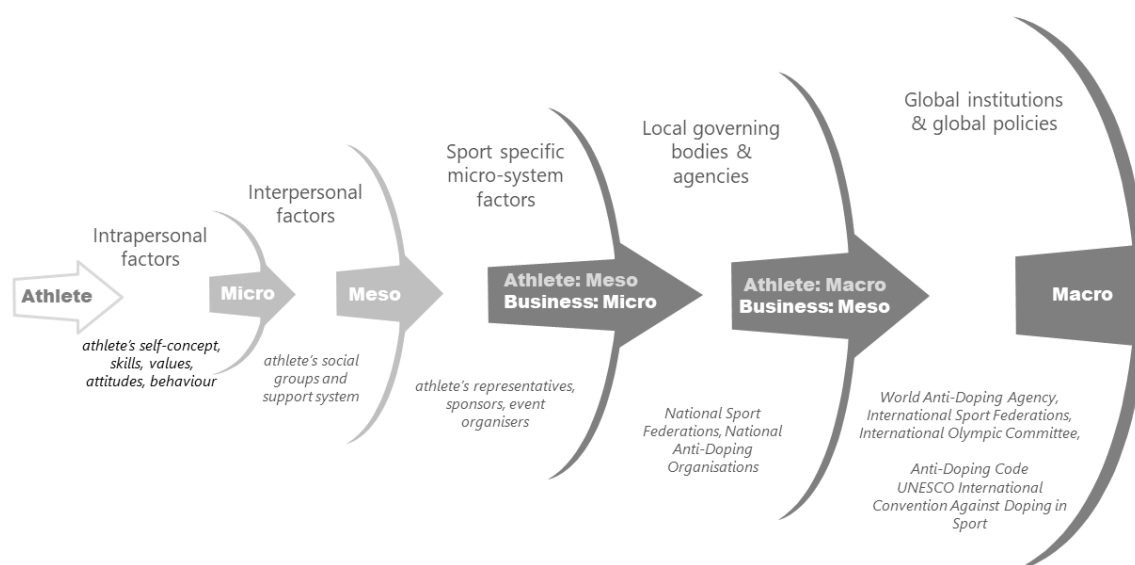


Figure 1. Socio-ecological system view of stakeholders with direct commercial (agents, race organisers and sponsors) and indirect financial (local governing bodies e.g. sport federations) interests in anti-doping

The World Anti-Doping Code (WADA 2021), and its acceptance by approximately 700 sport organisations, as well as other global initiatives such as the Council of Europe's Anti-Doping Treaty (1990) and UNESCO's Anti-Doping Convention (2007), signal long-standing political will to protect the fairness of sport. Further initiatives have moved beyond a singular focus on doping, such as the Council of Europe's Macolin Convention which aims to tackle the manipulation of sport competition (Council of Europe 2014), and UNESCO's Kazan Action Plan (UNESCO 2017) which aims to create EU-level coordination for tackling threats to the integrity of sport.

The criminalisation of doping and associated acts, such as trafficking, abetting, or conspiring, is a tool that has been patchily employed by governments around the world. The 116th Congress of the United States voted for the Rodchenkov Anti-Doping Act (2019) to protect US sport and athletes from organised doping at an international sporting level. Certain

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other countries have also passed laws criminalising various types of doping related offences, with Kenya being one of them in 2016, following a stream of doping scandals among its world-class distance runners. National level legislations variably impose sanctions on athletes for use (typically under fraud and not controlled substance laws), or on anyone in the athlete's environment for the production and trafficking of doping substances, or the abetting, conspiring, or covering up of doping (Murphy 2013, Reznik *et al.* 2020). Notably, making the doping of athletes a criminal offence is not universally supported in the anti-doping community (Cordeo 2022, Kornbeck and Kayser 2018) or by the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA). WADA's objection is specifically with regard to criminal sanctions for athletes who dope and appears to be borne out of a wish to maintain global harmonisation of the anti-doping rules. WADA note that the current sanctioning process of athletes who commit ADRVs is accepted by all the governments of the world. However, WADA themselves are in favour of governments introducing laws to penalise those who are putting banned substances into the hands of athletes and acknowledge that criminal legislation has been effective in catching athlete support personnel (WADA 2015 cited in full in VeloNews n.d.).

The Structure of Professional Distance Running

Due to the dominance of East African athletes in distance running, what happens in these countries reflects on the sport as a whole. Professional distance running is a unique sport in many ways. The unique aspects include the financial and commercial structure of the sport, the dominance of East Africa with a rich talent pool but poor resources for talent development, and the interdependency of athletes, athlete representatives (agents), sponsors and race organisers for athletic and commercial success.

Athletes' Income Sources

In long distance running, the primary sources of income for a professional athlete are prize/appearance money paid by major races, and endorsement deals with running shoe

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manufacturers. In the 1990s there was more money to be earned by distance runners in track races, however, there has been a decline in these opportunities as professional 10000m track races have almost vanished from the calendar. Conversely, the amount of money available to long distance runners in road races and big city marathons has increased over the same period. This has resulted in young, particularly East African, runners deserting the traditional career path in which one races primarily on the track through the teens and 20s before moving to road races in the latter part of a career, and instead focussing on road racing from the outset. North American, European, and Australasian runners, who may be less motivated by money (Elbe *et al.* 2010, Jarvie and Sikes 2012, Onywera *et al.* 2006, Wilber and Pitsiladis 2012), or may have more alternative sources of funding outside of prize money, have largely continued with a more traditional career progression.

The second main source of income for distance runners are endorsement deals from shoe manufacturers, which have been dominated globally by Nike and Adidas. Other brands, such as Asics, New Balance, Saucony, and Brooks, have invested in certain markets at certain times but up to now have had a limited presence in East Africa. Emerging brands in the running market, such as Hoka One One, On, Puma, Reebok, Skechers, and Under Armour, also sponsor a small number of athletes and groups, mostly in the USA. The contracts that athletes sign with shoe companies can vary widely, with the very best runners being paid seven figure sums annually, whereas upcoming runners receive merely a supply of kit and shoes (Gault 2018).

Talent identification and development in East Africa

The talent identification and development policies adopted by various countries and sports are diverse in approach (De Bosscher 2018). To the best of our knowledge, there have been no macro-level analyses of talent identification and development in East African countries to date. Within Kenyan distance running specifically, talent identification and

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development does not appear to be driven by a coherent national policy for elite sport development (Kanyiba *et al.* 2015), although, as is evident from the results, effective grassroots level sport systems do exist in Ethiopia and Kenya (Kamenju *et al.* 2016, Otieno and Omide 2020). At the elite level, the commercial interests of outside entities such as sponsors and agents are influential in harnessing the rich talent pool and translating that into global success.

Stakeholders with commercial interests

Within distance running, the decisions on which athletes are invited to the most prestigious and richest races are made by the race directors or elite athlete coordinators for those races. The decisions on which athletes receive endorsement deals are made by the marketing managers for the shoe companies. The deals between races/sponsors and athletes are usually negotiated on behalf of the athletes by their agents. The agents are also responsible for identifying and recruiting talented athletes, and sometimes for creating the infrastructure to support the athletes, such as setting up training camps, and organising coaching/physiotherapy. These three ‘commercial stakeholders’ control how money flows through professional long-distance running. They also have a strong influence on athletes’ development and earning potential, which in turn may impact athletes’ approaches to optimising their performances. One shared characteristic of these stakeholders is their vested commercial interests in both the performances of athletes under their contracts, and in maintaining an image of the sport that is attractive to customers and fans.

Re-thinking the boundaries of the environment for doping and anti-doping

Context matters because doping does not occur in a vacuum. In their 2018 editorial, Backhouse *et al.* (2018) defined the ‘dopogenic environment’ to acknowledge the impact of opportunities and conditions in the athlete’s surroundings that promote doping, and to shift the focus from individual morality, ethics, and shortcomings to the highly influential

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interactions between athletes, their social and support networks, and the organisational structures in which decisions about athletic performance, and performance-enhancement, take place. The extent to which an environment may be ‘dopogenic’ has been demonstrated in the McLaren Reports, which detailed the evidence of state-sponsored doping in Russia (McLaren 2016a, 2016b), and by a decade of rule violations by officials in weightlifting (International Testing Agency 2021). These reports depict sporting cultures that make doping easy and relatively risk free, or even in which it would have been very difficult for a top-level athlete *not* to dope. The ripples of these major incidents have impacted sport and anti-doping on a global scale (Heiberger *et al.* 2021, Ohl *et al.* 2021a, 2021b, Read *et al.* 2020, Wagner and Storm 2021).

Notwithstanding the limitation of the commercial stakeholder segment to certain sports (e.g., athletics, professional road cycling, boxing, triathlon, and tennis), agents, race organisers, and sponsors’ athlete managers deserve attention in anti-doping research. Being positioned between the athlete and the governing bodies, their role is unique because they can equally amplify or buffer the top-down anti-doping directives (Filstad 2014, Hope 2010, Radaelli and Sitton-Kent 2016, Teulier and Rouleu 2013). They can protect or exploit athletes with their strict or permissive approach to performance enhancement (Backhouse *et al.* 2018) and play a pivotal role in the level of pressure that athletes experience and might manage with the use of prohibited substances (Didymus and Backhouse 2020, Siebert 2020). The question that must be asked is what role, if any, do the financial structure of elite distance running and the agents, sponsors, and race directors have on doping risk in the sport.

Aims

To date, there is an absence of empirical studies which have examined how commercial stakeholders perceive the issue of doping, and/or how they act to minimise the risk of doping. This study, therefore, seeks to address this gap in the literature, and in doing

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so, to reveal an important perspective on the causes and potential solutions for doping in this sporting context, by addressing the following research questions: 1) How is doping in elite distance running perceived by the agents, race organisers, and sponsors who work in the sport?, 2) What actions are taken by the agents, race organisers, and sponsors to influence doping-risk in distance running?, and 3) What future actions could be taken by agents, race organisers, and sponsors to further influence doping-risk in distance running?

Methodology

To address the broad, exploratory, and differing nature of the research questions (e.g., perceptions, actions taken, future actions) a generic approach to qualitative inquiry was used in the current study. Consistent with this approach, the current research was guided by interpretivism. This interpretivist positioning is based on the existence of multiple individual realities and a belief that knowledge is subjective and co-constructed between the researcher and participants (Denzin and Lincoln 2017, Poucher *et al.* 2020). The primary aim of research, therefore, is to understand and interpret the world from the participants' point of view (Sparkes and Smith 2013). With this in mind, it is important to note that the first author is a competitive distance runner and played the role of a 'passionate participant' (Sparkes and Smith 2009, p.10) in uncovering the meaning that the participants (i.e., individuals working in professional distance running) ascribe to their experiences (Poucher *et al.* 2020). Having an 'insider' status meant the first author was able to have comprehensive and wide-ranging conversations with the participants and thereby examine the meaning that they ascribe to the problem of doping.

Participants

To address the research questions, the inclusion criteria included any individual from one of the following three groups, 1) race directors or elite athlete coordinators for professional road or track races, 2) sports marketing managers for running shoe companies,

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and 3) athlete representatives registered with World Athletics (i.e., “agents”), with a focus on those representing world-class long-distance runners. Participants were recruited (via personal contacts and social media) from across the world using criterion-based sampling (Patton 2014). Informed consent was obtained from all participants and the final sample ($n = 13$) were all male, aged between 34 and 72 ($Mage = 49$) and had between 9 and 37 years ($Mean = 22$ years) of experience working in a professional capacity in distance running. This excludes any years that the participants spent competing as professional distance runners (which five of them did) and focuses on time spent in organisational roles. The sample included individuals who had served numerous roles within the sport – such as a race director turned global sports marketing manager for a prominent American running shoe company, and agents who also serve as race directors, coaches, commentators, film directors, and statisticians. Going off their current primary roles, the sample comprised agents ($n = 8$), race directors ($n = 3$), and sports marketing directors for shoe brands ($n = 2$). All but two participants, a sponsor representative and an agent, have had direct connection with East African athletes through their professional roles in the past or present, and were able to speak from extensive personal experience.

Data Collection

Ethical approval for the study was granted by the Faculty Research Ethics Committee, Faculty of Science, Engineering and Computing, Kingston University (approval received on 06/09/2020, approval number: 1637). Following this, telephone interviews were used to collect data, because the high-profile nature of the participants, the sensitive nature of the topic (i.e., causes and potential solutions for doping), and the participants being spread across the world made face-to-face interviews logistically difficult (Sparkes and Smith 2013). A semi-structured interview guide was developed to address the research questions, and this

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was refined throughout the data collection process. The interview guide was split into three main topics and modified for agents, race directors, and sponsors. The first topic was about the perceptions of doping/anti-doping in elite distance running (e.g., “do you feel there is more or less doping in elite distance running now, compared with 20 years ago?”), the second topic focused on current actions to promote clean sport (e.g., “is there anything that you do within your role to try to minimise the risk of doping and to promote clean sport?”), and the third topic centred around future actions to promote clean sport (e.g., “outside of the work of the Athletics Integrity Unit and the NADOs, what can others within distance running do to make the sport cleaner?”). The interviews were conducted by the first author and lasted between 37 and 188 minutes (Mean = 58mins).

Data Analysis

The interview audio-recordings were professionally transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2019). Reflexive thematic analysis was specifically selected because of its emphasis on the subjectivity of the researcher, as well as for its concerted engagement with the data during interpretation (Braun and Clarke 2019, 2020). The six-phases of reflexive thematic analysis were conducted by the first author. During phase one, the transcripts were carefully proofread while listening to the audio-recordings, to promote familiarity with the content. The subsequent inductive coding of the data made up phase two of the analysis and was conducted manually via adding semantic codes in the transcript margins (see Trainor and Bundon 2020). Analytical notes were also made during this phase, focusing mostly on the underpinning meaning and commonalities between participants. Similar codes from across transcripts were amalgamated and then grouped into subthemes and themes during the third phase of analysis, and in phase four, the data set was viewed as whole set of themes to determine whether the structure made sense.

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During this process, the themes and subthemes were printed out and spread across a table, to better visualise and re-order the connections between them (see Trainor and Bundon 2020). An example of an initial code was ‘Marketing value for Nike is to have the winners wearing their shoes, regardless of doping concerns’, the corresponding subtheme was ‘Nike’s ‘Win at all Costs’ attitude’, and this was ultimately grouped into the broader theme of ‘Recruitment Strategies’. At this stage the second and third authors acted as ‘critical friends’ (Smith and McGannon 2018) and encouraged reflexivity by challenging the first author’s construction of knowledge. Phase five involved further reflecting on and clearly defining the themes. The selection of appropriate quotes to support each theme and the write up of the results section concluded the sixth and final phase of data analysis.

Quality criteria

The quality of the current study can be judged using a ‘relativist’ approach (Sparkes and Smith 2009), in line with the first author’s interpretivist philosophical position. This involves formulating a list of characteristics for the unique purpose of the study and methodological approach used, and then using this list to evaluate the particular form of qualitative research, rather than using a universal set of criteria (Sparkes and Smith 2009). To judge the current study, the following criteria may act as a starting point: Firstly, the system behind doping in elite distance running is a relevant, timely, and significant issue, as depicted in the introduction (i.e., *worthiness of the topic*). Secondly, the recruitment of a previously unstudied group of participants (i.e., agents, race directors, shoe sponsors) who engaged in in-depth interviews ensured *rigour* and *novelty* and produced rich data on the causes and structural drivers of doping. Further to this, the second and third authors provided feedback and reflections on the data throughout the analytical process (i.e., ‘critical friend’, Smith and McGannon 2018). Participants were also offered the opportunity to review the results and

feedback their own interpretations of the data (i.e., member reflections and ethical practice) and confirmed they were all comfortable with the way in which their views had been portrayed. *Methodological coherence* is evidenced through a consistent philosophical position (i.e., interpretivism) across research questions, data collection methods (i.e., semi-structured interviews) and analysis (i.e., reflexive thematic analysis).

Results

All participants interviewed in this study have been involved with long-distance running for most of their lives, and now work in influential roles within the sport. Following a thorough analysis of the data, three main themes, each with subthemes, were co-constructed. The first theme captures the framework of professional distance running and delves into certain contextual aspects which may contribute to doping risk. The second theme is about the impact of various recruitment strategies, and the third theme illustrates the lessons that can be learnt from the participants' first-hand experiences with doping cases and/or managing anti-doping requirements.

The Bigger Picture: The Context around Doping in Professional Distance Running

In this theme, the participants give some perspective regarding where the problem of doping sits within the broader challenges for the historical, but slightly unfashionable, sport of professional distance running. Views on the effectiveness of the international governing body, World Athletics, naturally follow on from this, and participants also emphasised how the multiple roles served by many influential figures can create damaging conflicts of interest. The following three subthemes expand further on the participants' views on these issues.

Fix Doping to Fix the Sport, or Fix the Sport to Fix Doping?

Participants felt less able to enjoy a world-class distance running performance now, as compared to the past, because of their increased uncertainty over whether performances may have been pharmacologically enhanced. They expressed frustration that they, and everyone else, have been robbed of the sense of wonder that was once associated by watching the fastest runners in the world, and which has now been replaced by doubt and scepticism.

Participant 2, a race director for one of the biggest marathons in the world, felt that:

“When you look at the number of athletes who won the event and were then subsequently disqualified because of doping positives, I believe this has continued to destroy the public belief that anyone who is running at the front is likely to be a cheat... I think that we may be moving to a position, in the next 20 years, where if doping is not stopped, there will stop being money in distance running and that, in itself, will solve the issue.”

However, some other participants felt that elite distance running is already so unpopular as a spectator sport, that the incentive to tackle doping as forcefully as is necessary is not there, the investment of money and human resources that it would take to restore the integrity of distance running would only be worth it if there were a commercially viable sport to fight for.

An area of agreement between the participants was that the popularity of distance running is significantly hindered by suboptimal marketing and structuring. In many cases, the participants felt that the changes needed to make the sport more popular would also make it cleaner. For instance, some participants suggested that there is currently an unhealthy obsession on fast times. Races that are geared towards fast times tend to be less interesting, because there is less chance of the drama of an upset or unexpected result. And races that are won in fast times also perhaps favour the doped athletes, as explained by participant 5, who is a world-leading agent and coach:

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“The drugs give more of an advantage in fast races when there’s pacemakers because that is just a fitness test. But the drugs won’t make you any better tactically, and so in a championship race, it is of greater importance to actually be a good competitor”

Some major marathon race directors came to the same conclusion as participant 5 and explained how they now have a more considered approach to the assembly of elite fields. Instead of exclusively targeting fast times and world records, where pacemakers set a consistently fast pace from the beginning, thus reducing the contest to a purely physiological affair (in contrast to un-paced races where tactics and skill have greater importance), they recruit diverse and interesting elite fields that they hope will produce tight and exciting races.

Another challenge that is almost unique to distance running is that access to the highest-level competitions is fairly unrestricted – if you are fast enough, you will get a place in a big race quite quickly. Certain participants felt that if you were to define a smaller elite pool of athletes who would compete in a series of the main competitions, then the fans could get to know the athletes better and become more invested in following their progress throughout the season. It was noted that a by-product of creating such a defined pool of athletes would be that anti-doping would become more targeted, and thus more effective.

World Athletics: A Little Better all the Time

The body responsible for implementing the wholesale changes necessary to both minimise doping risk and better promote the sport is World Athletics. However, the recent history of corruption within World Athletics has not been forgotten by the participants. There is a lingering mistrust of the governing body, partly due to the shocking nature of the exploitation (e.g., extorting money to cover up doping), and also the continuing presence within the governing body of individuals who worked there at the time of the corruption.

With that said, most participants felt that the establishment of the AIU was a positive move, and that the AIU have improved anti-doping within athletics. Participants felt that the

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AIU's increased emphasis on investigative work was producing a more targeted testing programme and in turn leading to more cheats being caught. The introduction of an out of competition drug testing funding scheme for road races, which now sees agents, races, and athletes financially contributing to anti-doping, was also generally felt to be a constructive AIU initiative.

One misgiving about the recent work of the AIU, raised by agents and one sponsor, was that the Athlete Biological Passport (ABP) could be generating ADRVs for innocent athletes. There was concern that the athletes were not being given a fair opportunity to defend themselves in these cases, because of the complexity of the ABP and the AIU having a monopoly on the relevant experts that would be needed on both sides for an impartial decision. Participant 8, a highly experienced agent, explains how the sense of unfairness felt has a knock-on effect on stakeholder buy in to the push for clean sport:

“To me, the AIU's strategy showed that they just wanted to win a case, they were not interested in the truth. You want to find out how people can contribute, to take a role to educate athletes, and to help the athletes not to dope. But if I do that and somebody, in my opinion, is accused wrongly, and I don't feel we had a fair chance to defend ourselves, why the fuck would I care?”

Quid Pro Quo Maintains the Status Quo

Some participants were reluctant to support all AIU initiatives, and that reluctance was borne out of the perception that conflicts of interest still exist all the way up to the very top of the sport with the President of World Athletics, Lord Sebastian Coe. The AIU are operationally independent of World Athletics, but still financially dependent on World Athletics. Coe had ties to Nike for 38 years before resigning from his ambassadorial role after mounting criticism, but some participants felt that Coe still lacks impartiality and criticised what were viewed as acts of preferential treatment towards certain athletes and companies.

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This was seen as a barrier to bringing the community together in a truly collective effort to fight doping and was cited by one global brand manager as a reason contributing to their decision not to assist with the funding of the AIU.

For others, the key conflict of interest is that many of the parties involved in professional distance running have a vested interest in maintaining good relationships with one another. It was explained that agents depend on race directors to secure invitations for their athletes to the races, and race organisers depend on agents to supply high quality athletes for their elite fields. There is a resulting unwillingness to be critical of one another, or to hold one another to account on matters such as anti-doping. These issues can become yet more conflicted when the same company or individual serves a dual role as both agent and race director, as is the case for many of the major races around the world. The participants had major reservations about this situation, as expressed by participant 11, an agent who represents numerous top East African marathon runners:

“The reason I'm not going to piss off a lot of my other management colleagues is because I rely on them to get my athletes into their races, which they organise. There are certain key agencies which you just don't get on the wrong side of because, ultimately, they're going to say yes or no to a particular athlete getting into a marathon... and if they don't like you, they'll just say no. I think if you're a manager, you should not be organising elite fields for races. I think that is a big problem... And it is a bit ridiculous sometimes when you see the manager for an athlete negotiating with himself to put a fee and a structure down, and then taking a percentage. I don't think that's right... but that's just the nature of the sport at the moment.”

Further to this, an issue that was particularly pertinent for the shoe companies was that when a major race is sponsored by a rival shoe company, their sponsored athletes are often excluded from competing in that race. Given that many major races around the world are

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sponsored by shoe companies, some felt that this was an obstruction to fair access to competition.

Scoping out Doping: Recruitment Strategies Influence Doping Risk

The careful recruitment of athletes that could be trusted and believed in was a central strategy employed by agents, race directors, and shoe sponsors, to promote clean sport. Correspondingly, the careless recruitment of athletes by all three parties was felt to be a significant driver of doping in professional distance running. This phenomenon is explored in more detail through the three subthemes below.

You are the Company you Keep

Race directors and shoe sponsors described the concrete steps that they have taken to minimise the risk of doping. Shoe sponsors spoke about the inclusion of a clause within each athlete's contract that allows the contract to be immediately suspended upon the initial notification of an ADRV, and then terminated if the ADRV is confirmed. Race directors spoke about paying for in competition doping controls at their events and contributing money towards out of competition testing programmes. Furthermore, the majority of shoe sponsors and race directors interviewed implemented a zero-tolerance policy, meaning that an athlete who has previously served a doping suspension would never again be offered a contract with their shoe companies or be invited to compete in the elite field of their races.

On top of these tangible measures, all participants spoke about the more inexact science of trying to weed out possible dopers from their brands/races/agencies via careful and deliberate recruitment. Because the participants are insiders, deeply embedded in the world of elite distance running, they are well placed to make judgements about which athletes are more likely to be doping. These judgements are based upon numerous factors, often related to the athletes' associations and progression, rather than their outright performance level. An extremely high level of performance was not, in and of itself, seen by most participants as an

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indicator of doping – in fact most participants had a fervent belief, based on athletes that they have worked closely with, that an extremely high level of performance is possible without doping. However, high level performances in association with other factors, such as an association with ‘shady characters’, or an extreme progression, were deemed suspicious and generally would lead to such an athlete being avoided. Participants accepted that this method is not infallible and that there are sometimes athletes who will dope that they could not have predicted, and sometimes athletes that they would avoid due to concerns about doping who have not doped.

Some participants spoke about taking this strategy one-step further, and excluding not just suspicious athletes, but entire agencies or training groups that have dubious reputations. Participant 4, the elite athlete coordinator for a major marathon, spoke about how such a policy has worked in practice:

“We’ve never made a public announcement that we’re not going to work with a certain agent, but we have told people, ‘You have not shown that we can trust you right now, your athletes have not shown that we can trust them, and we need to take a little break’, and we have done that. That has meant something in the industry, other agents, other representatives have sat up and taken notice of that. I don’t believe that our events have suffered without these athletes or without these agents’ athletes in our race.”

Some shoe companies too have opted not to offer contacts to athletes working with certain agents or have used their influence to steer their sponsored athletes away from agents and coaches with bad reputations, and towards the safer choices.

Nike’s ‘Win at all Costs’ Attitude

Not all companies place such a high importance on assessing the likelihood of doping of the athletes and agents they choose to work with. The approach adopted by Nike was a

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frequent topic of discussion, due to their prominence as perhaps the largest global investor in professional distance running. A majority of participants viewed Nike as a company that have adopted a 'win at all costs' business model, who will sign the best and fastest athletes without being overly concerned about whether those athletes are doping. This is perceived to be a long-standing strategy implemented from the top down within the company. Particular reference was made to Nike's decision to re-sign Justin Gatlin after the conclusion of his doping ban as an example of this policy in practice. The participants could understand why Nike have adopted this stance - as put by Participant 5, "Nike are not in the business of promoting track and field or clean sport, they're in the business of selling shoes". And the view was that generally when an athlete sponsored by Nike does get banned for doping, there is not too much of a negative impact on the brand itself, as they are not generally seen as being directly involved with the doping. This is explained by participant 3, who currently works as an event organiser and was previously the senior sports marketing manager for a rival running shoe brand:

"There's very little downside for big brands. Say you sponsor some athlete who goes and wins all these gold medals, that makes everybody love your brand because you have the fastest people on the planet, your product must be amazing, and it must be the fastest stuff and it's so elite. There's an aura around your brand because of the athletes you have. And then they go and get caught for doping years later. You made all your money, you got all your publicity and now if you want to you can just stand back and go, 'Well we had nothing to do with this, we didn't know this was happening.'..."

The marketing value for Nike in having runners cross the finish line in first place is viewed as outweighing whatever detrimental impact the company may experience following doping scandals down the road.

Success as an Agent in Distance Running: A Numbers Game?

Most agents in this study described their careful recruitment approach, based on long-term development of talented and committed young athletes, with a meaningful relationship built up over time between agent and athlete. These agents naturally tend to work with smaller numbers of athletes and can therefore monitor their athletes more closely. However, an alternative approach favoured by other agents also exists, one in which large numbers of athletes are recruited and supported. Participant 13, one of the younger agents in the study, gives his observation of this dichotomy:

“[Agency Name omitted] obviously have a huge budget from Nike to support that number of athletes. And when a company like Nike is giving you that much money to win medals and win world marathon majors, well you kind of need to support that many athletes because the pressure is there to achieve and to find that athlete... I guess the reason why I would not support doing things the way [Agent Name omitted] does is that I want to know the athletes who I'm working with. Who's that athlete that signed that piece of paper with my name on it and my company name on it? But that's the way he chooses to do it and he's produced a lot of athletes that have won a lot of medals and won a lot of major races. Unfortunately, he's also had a lot of doping cases to go with that.”

None of the participants knew of any agents that were actively involved in assisting athletes to dope. However, the perception was that certain agents must be aware that there are likely dopers within their agency, but they do not look too closely or ask too many questions. One agent described a former colleague as follows: “He'd be against drugs, but if somebody takes them and doesn't get caught, then he'd say that's bad from the ones testing them.” There was a range in how the participants felt about this type of ‘hands-off’ approach to athlete management. Some felt that it was utterly unacceptable and that if you're a professional

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working in the sport, you should know if one of your athletes is doping, and if one of your athletes tests positive, you should suffer a ban too. Others felt that managing large numbers of athletes was a legitimate business model and that within such a business model, doping positives are an inherent risk. The majority opinion was that agents should do all they can to prevent doping, but that they cannot always be held totally responsible if the occasional doping case does occur within their group.

Doping: The Causes and the Solutions

The majority of participants have first-hand experience of one or more athletes that they have worked with or recruited, being sanctioned with an ADRV. This theme explores the key drivers of doping in this specific population, and the correct response to take to punish those behind the doping and prevent recurrences. The following subthemes expand on the participants' views.

Poor and Desperate, Rich and Dishonest

Some of the more experienced agents in the study spoke about how the competition among agents to sign the best athletes in certain countries has increased. For instance, it was noted that there are many more agents working in Kenya than there used to be in the late 1990s/early 2000s, and furthermore, the working model has changed. Previously, the agents would recruit young athletes from the junior championships, then the athletes would develop on the track circuit, before eventually moving up to the marathon later in their careers. Now agents are signing athletes and sending them straight to major city marathons, because that is where the money currently is in the sport. This change has led to some agents stepping away from the representation of Kenyan athletes, such as participant 7:

“Part of the whole thing with Kenya, why I didn’t want to do it anymore, was because of that free for all among agents and athletes, I just didn’t want to be associated with it. So having spent lots of time in Kenya and worked with some great individuals and

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made great friendships, I made a choice to move away from that... I just didn't like the atmosphere anymore."

The punishment for doping (i.e., being banned from sport) was not always felt to be enough of a deterrent to doping, given that the benefits of doping could be to win an amount of money that would change some athletes' lives forever. The shrinking of various budgets and the cancellation on numerous races in the wake of Covid-19 was felt to be another exacerbating factor, creating a situation where the same population of athletes are competing for a smaller pot of money, leading to an even greater pressure on the athletes to perform.

It was felt that the idea to dope was rarely coming from the athletes themselves, but from the husbands/boyfriends of female athletes, or other coaches/brokers/associates looking to use the athletes to make money quickly, as explained by Participant 12, an experienced agent who has worked with many top Ethiopian and Kenyan athletes over the past 20 years:

"The athletes don't come into athletics to dope, they run because they love athletics, maybe some of them see the business opportunity in athletics, maybe they're passionate, or maybe some people are born to run... it's the coaches who corrupt them down the road, or some middle people, or boyfriend, or husband, or broker, etc."

Another 'branch' of cheating was also discussed at length, and that was the use of non-prohibited drugs to enhance performance. This included the misuse of Therapeutic Use Exemptions, or the use of novel and undetectable performance-enhancing substances. The participants were of the unequivocal view that this kind of behaviour amounts to cheating, because an unfair advantage is gained, and felt that the people who do these things have various ways of justifying their behaviour to themselves, none of which the participants deemed to be valid. The driver again appears to be desperation, but, in this case, desperation born out of ego satisfaction rather than poverty.

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Fool me Once, Shame on you, Fool me Twice, Shame on me

Of the three groups of commercial stakeholders that make up the participants in the current study, it is the agents who are most closely tied to the athletes, and they are therefore the ones who take the most blame if an athlete tests positive under their management. The way in which an agent reacts to a positive case was felt to be significant.

When faced with an ADRV within their agency, the agents in this study felt that it was essential for them to collaborate with the doping authorities to get to the bottom of how the doping came to take place, so that measures can be put in place to prevent it from happening again. This can be very challenging, as explained by participant 11:

“I didn't believe what he was telling us, so we tried to explain to him that if he cooperated and brought about some understanding of how it happened, then he might get a reduction on his four-year ban. I know there had to have been people around him that assisted him to do what he did. But he was denying any knowledge or responsibility. That was frustrating because what we're trying to do is root it out and understand how this would happen. Even if he had wanted to cooperate, he had a lot of pressure, most likely from the people that knew what he was doing, for him not to cooperate. I've heard of instances where they will pay the athlete sometimes just to be quiet and, therefore, they'll get paid not to say anything.”

Some participants felt that criminal investigations would be more effective at rooting out the serious doping offenders, while others felt that a financial penalty would help to disincentivise doping. Lifetime bans for dopers were also favoured by many of the participants, as it often sat uncomfortably seeing athletes who had returned from doping bans winning big races again.

One recurrent area of discussion was whether it would be justified to impose sanctions on agents who had multiple athletes within their agencies testing positive. The

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sample were split on this point, and several commented that though they may support such a sanction in principle, it would be difficult to enforce legally, given that it would be hard to prove that an agent was involved in the doping. However, official sanctions were not always felt to be strictly necessary, as it was noted that the sport could effectively ‘self-police’, if all the major sponsors and races decided not to do business with a certain agency because of repeat doping offences, then that agency would very quickly be out of business. Here it was noted that it is actually the races and the sponsors who can drive change, as they are the ones who hold the purse strings.

Discussion

This study aimed to expand the immediate athlete environment to include the commercial stakeholders, who have a strong influence on athletes’ livelihoods and earning potential. We also sought to understand the actions taken by the participants in the best interests of clean sport, and gathered their thoughts on the causes of, and best solutions to, the issue of doping. Due to the life histories of the participants, many of whom competed as athletes themselves and have filled multiple roles in the sport, they were able to offer a broad view of the problem of doping and had well-formed and articulate views on how it could be improved. Without exception they all spoke openly and candidly, being appreciative for the opportunity to discuss this prominent issue in distance running.

***‘The Sport is on its Knees’*: The Lack of a Coherent Professional and Commercial Structure for Elite Distance Running Allowed Doping to Flourish**

Even though the participants are all passionate and lifelong distance running ‘people’, there was a good deal of pessimism expressed about its current state. The challenges faced by the sport are not unique, weightlifting, for example, has been hit perhaps even harder by doping and corruption issues, with the result being that weightlifting may be removed from the Olympic programme for the 2028 Games. Key stakeholders identified three crucial

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changes required for a way forward for weightlifting, namely: governance reform, cleaning up doping, and making the sport more interesting (Oliver 2022). These three points were also raised in the present study, in relation to professional distance running, with a consensus that two of these - governance reform and effective anti-doping measures - are moving in the right direction. However, according to the participants, the third aspect, modernising and re-popularising professional distance running, does not seem to have made as much progress. Moreover, the participants highlighted the relationships and reciprocities between the three factors. Specifically, good governance is critical for both effective anti-doping, and a sound commercial strategy. Equally, an improved commercial structure can promote doping free distance running and doping free distance running would make the sport more commercially successful. To give just one example from this study - major city road races that see marketing/commercial value in their elite races have more impetus to ensure that their races are 'clean' and are thus more incentivised to contribute to anti-doping. If the elite races become irrelevant sideshows to the money-making mass participant races at major city marathons, then these powerful stakeholders will be less inclined to invest in anti-doping.

Clearly, changing the marketing structure of distance running would not be enough to eliminate doping. But the changes which are required for the long-term financial health of elite distance running may have the desirable side effect of further marginalising the doping and dopers, squeezing them out of the bigger and better paying competitions and sponsorship deals, and generally creating an environment in which doping is less tolerated, less feasible, and thus ultimately less likely. The other obvious advantage of commercial and financial success is that the more money there is coming into professional distance running, the more there will be to put towards anti-doping initiatives.

Talent identification and development in the global distance running market

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From the commercial stakeholders' accounts, two talent management models have been identified. Based on their key characteristics, these may be labelled as the '*Find and Nurture*' (FN) or the '*Natural Selection*' (NS) pathway. The FN model, which was followed by the agents in this study, represents an entrepreneurial, small business approach with the focus on a smaller number of talents whose development is closely managed to ensure that they reach their predicted potential. In a business sense, this model is a high-risk high-reward strategy. In contrast, the NS model, adopted by other agencies and some sponsors within distance running, can be characterised as a low-risk high-reward model where a large initial talent pool is created, with many athletes being equally supported but with little individualised attention offered. The level of responsibility taken by those following the NS model is limited, but this approach is costly, especially in terms of the initial investment required.

Working *Within* the System but Calling for Changes at Structural- and Policy Levels

The dynamic between social responsibility, love of the sport, and commercial interests led commercial stakeholders in this study to work within the existing sporting and anti-doping system, but also offered valuable insights into how to change the systems for the better. High level global initiatives for protecting the integrity of sport signal a strong political will. However, with all good intentions, these initiatives are a world apart from the reality of elite sport in developing countries, with distance running offering a prime example of this disconnect. Participants in this study felt that there is still frustratingly little achieved in addressing the suppliers and facilitators of doping after each new positive test. What could have a more lasting impact on doping in this environment is the further investigation and breaking up of the aiders and abettors of doping. To achieve this, more clarity and global harmonisation is needed around the powers granted to the relevant authorities to investigate the facilitators behind doping.

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World Athletics have recently introduced new regulations around minimum testing requirements, due to concerns over the high number of doping cases from certain countries. Rule 15 of the World Athletics anti-doping rules now states that athletes must have been subject to at least three out of competition tests in the lead up to major events (e.g., Olympics or World Championships), and currently only applies to athletes from Belarus, Bahrain, Ethiopia, Kenya, Morocco, Nigeria, and Ukraine. These regulations may bring some rigour to distance running at the elite international level, but they will not affect doping in East African countries at the national level (Chebet 2014, Lenten *et al.* 2017) where athletes not only compete for the medals and national pride, but for professional race opportunities and sponsorship deals (Ogama and Sakwa 2019). On the corporate side, there are measures currently adopted by several of the main sponsors of distance runners that produce a financial disincentive to doping, such as the policy not to work with athletes who have previously served a doping suspension. One can assume that if an athlete were to have very limited possibilities to earn money from the sport upon returning from a ban, then they would be less likely to attempt a comeback. Therefore, such policies, if universally adopted by all major financial contributors, would mean that a doping suspension essentially serves as a life ban from the money-making, professional side of distance running. This could be significant, since previous research suggests that financial sanctions are a greater deterrent to doping than a ban from sport (Overbye *et al.* 2015, Westmattmann *et al.* 2018, 2020). Lenten and colleagues go even further when they propose a conditional superannuation scheme for tackling doping (Lenten and Smith 2020, Lenten *et al.* 2017)

If there were a significant stock market reaction each time a doping case were reported, that would unequivocally induce a reaction from a big corporation. It is hypothesised in a recent review on corporate misconduct (Carberry *et al.* 2018) that investors are more likely to react negatively when the media presents clear and credible information

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that the company was in some way responsible for the misconduct, and that the misconduct was the result of deeper organisational problems. Therefore, it may be necessary for the media to shift focus away from the athletes banned for doping, and towards the companies they are supported by, to compel those companies to change their approach. However, some companies, notably Nike, do not adopt such a policy and have re-signed athletes following doping suspensions, as highlighted by their decision to re-sign twice-banned sprinter Justin Gatlin in 2015. As explained in the results section, this is because there is no significant reputational or financial damage to a big brand, if one of their athletes is found to be doping. This has also been shown to be the case in cycling – a 2016 study assessed the impact of 25 doping scandals on the relevant cycling team’s primary sponsor’s daily stock return, and no significant impact was observed (Danylchuk *et al.* 2016). A more recent study, in which Danish managers from companies sponsoring cycling teams were interviewed, went further still, and suggested that doping scandals can occasionally even be advantageous for sponsors because it made cycling a cheap sponsorship opportunity (Wagner and Iversen 2022).

In the absence of collective goodwill, there is also a need for mechanisms to encourage collective responsibility via legislation (e.g., criminalisation of assisting, encouraging, aiding, abetting, conspiring, covering up) and bylaws (e.g., banning sponsors/agents/race directors for assisting, encouraging, abetting, conspiring, covering up). Throughout the history of anti-doping, many of the major breakthroughs into the systems behind doping have resulted from law enforcement actions made possible by national-level legislation prohibiting various aspects of doping facilitation (e.g., Operacion Puerto, Operation Aderlass, The Okagbare/Lira Doping Case, etc.). Clearly, a support person who is supplying drugs to an athlete will not themselves return a positive doping test. Therefore, the catching and sanctioning of support personnel depends on alternative methods to an

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analytical test, such as search warrants, phone tapping, forensics, paper trails, and informants. For these methods to be deployed, there must be legislation in place allowing their use in the correct circumstances. WADA have been able to harmonise the anti-doping rules governing many of the major sports across the world. Their next challenge, if taken up, is to convince governments around the world to introduce consistent laws that increase investigative powers for the uncovering of doping facilitators. The observed trend of expanding anti-doping to a broader scope of sport integrity in many anti-doping organisations (e.g., Sport Integrity Australia) and sport federations (e.g., in athletics, tennis, biathlon, gymnastics, etc.) may facilitate this development.

Moving Forward with Collective Responsibility

Each commercial stakeholder has a unique relationship with the athlete, whose performance they all benefit from financially. Agents and sponsors through their recruiters and representatives are in direct contact with the athletes under their contracts. Race organisers are a step removed from the athletes' personal environments because they do not have direct involvement in the athlete's day-to-day development, but they do provide the platforms where athletes, and their agents, can achieve sporting and financial success. This symbiotic operation is best paraphrased from an analogy offered by one of the participants in this study: *The agents are the producers of apples, shoe companies are the ones putting the wrapping on these apples, and the races are the place where they sell these apples.* The nature of co-dependencies is depicted in Figure 2.

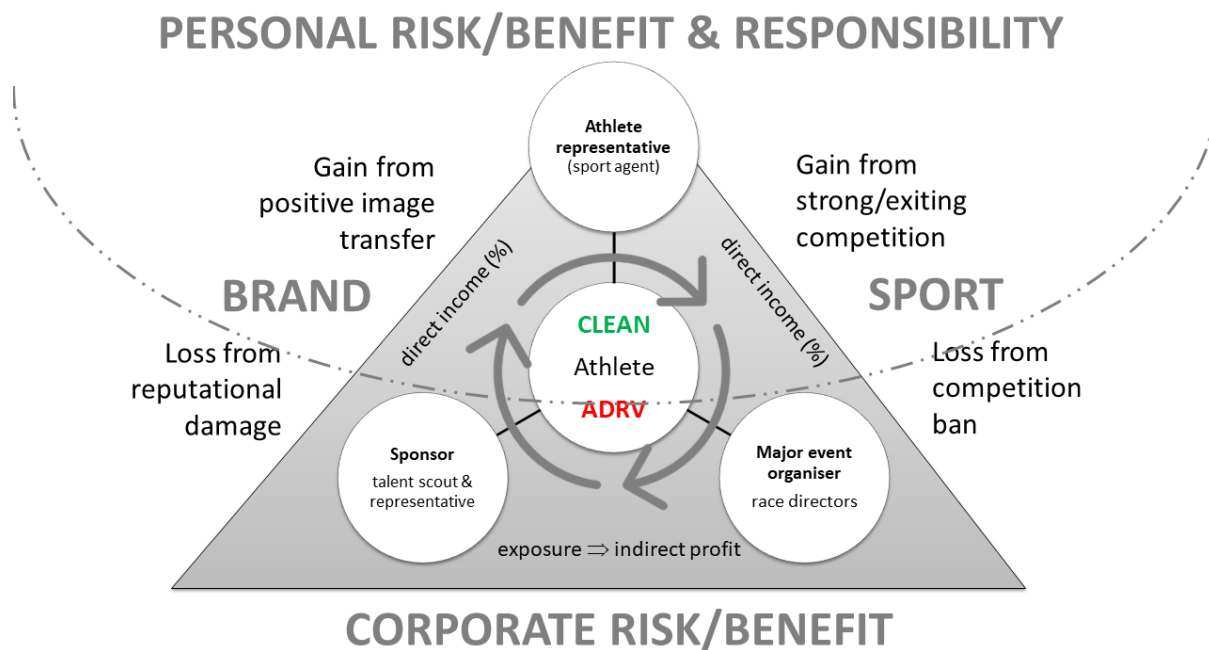


Figure 2. Co-dependency and consequences of doping on commercial stakeholders

On the one hand, as we observed before, commercial stakeholders depend on each other: race directors are in control of the platform on which athletes can perform and earn money for themselves and for their agents, and where sponsors leverage their investment into athlete endorsements through the marketing value of the athlete’s appearance and success through exposure and (positive) image transfer. Sponsorship deals offer the necessary funding for training and provisions for the athlete, including shoes and other apparel items. Using the concept of individual, social and environmental responsibility for health (Resnik 2007), one can argue that responsibility for anti-doping code compliance and clean sport behaviour does not solely reside with the athlete but includes those who control and influence critical social and environmental factors. On the other hand, all commercial stakeholders rely on the athlete’s performance and personal conduct, but do not share the risks or personal responsibilities equally. According to the WADA Code, athletes bear the consequences of ADRVs, whether they result from intentional infringements of the principles of clean sport, or inadvertent rule violation due to a lack of anti-doping awareness, recklessness, or a lapse

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in vigilance. Sponsors and race directors are impacted by a positive doping test and ensuing sanctions through the tarnished image of the athlete, but they do not generally accept personal responsibility, nor are they directly affected personally. However, agents with fiduciary responsibilities are obliged by law to act in the athletes' best interest and carry personal responsibility to do so. In anti-doping, their responsibility may stretch into areas such as prevention and education. Juma *et al* (2022) showed that in the absence of adequate anti-doping education in Kenya, athletes tend to rely on coaches and managers as information sources, which can make athletes vulnerable to exploitation by those with vested commercial interests in athletes' success.

Albeit in another sport, research into the causes of doping within cycling has already moved beyond the user-perspective, to explore those around the user. Ohl *et al* (2015) defined three types of cycling team - the converted, the opportunist, and the resistant - based on how teams responded to doping scandals. The "converted" teams go above and beyond the expectations of the anti-doping regulations and ensure that any new riders recruited have not been in any way involved in previous doping activities, publicly demonstrated via signing up as members of the Movement for Credible Cycling (MPCC, www.mpcc.fr/). The "opportunist" teams, while formally supportive of anti-doping, take no exceptional measures to prevent doping. These teams do not directly supply doping products to their riders, but they accept and tolerate the risk that some riders may engage in doping on an individual basis. Finally, the third type is the "resistant" team, which may still actively support doping practices, rarely condemn doping, and consistently recruit former dopers.

Many parallels can be drawn between these types of cycling teams, and the different types of agencies described in this study. Several of the agents interviewed described the lengths they go to, to prevent doping from occurring within their groups and the decisive actions taken to condemn and eradicate doping when it does occur. Some agents go as far as

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committing to paying back the money earned by the athlete for a given period prior to the positive test. The reason some agents do that is not because they must, but because they want to signal to the wider sporting community that they condemn their athletes' actions and want to fight doping. These agencies are thus very much akin to the "converted" cycling teams. However, the other type of agency that exists within the professional distance running community are those who absolve themselves of all responsibility for doping, by denying all knowledge or culpability. They manage high volumes of athletes and take very little responsibility for the policing of their own group, seeing that as a job for the anti-doping authorities. This agency type is analogous to the "opportunist" cycling teams. There was no evidence in this study of any agencies, races, or sponsors that operated in the way of the "hesitant" cycling teams, and directly supported doping of athletes. However, the results of this study provide strong evidence from within the industry that some commercial stakeholders do not see it as their responsibility to contribute towards making the sport cleaner.

One of the ways in which cycling has made anti-doping the responsibility of all commercial stakeholders is via the way that their anti-doping programme is funded. In a system that has been in place for many years, riders, race organisers, and pro teams all contribute significant amounts of funding to the UCI for its anti-doping programme, with fixed contributions made by each level of race and team (McKay 2011). In comparison, prior to 2020, all funding for the World Athletics anti-doping came from World Athletics itself. Since then, World Athletics have begun to adopt a more collaborative funding model and have raised \$2.5 million for out-of-competition testing on distance runners from race organisers, agents, athletes, and shoe brands (Berkeley 2020, Gillen 2019). It remains to be seen if this shift in funding represents a long overdue move towards collective responsibility for anti-doping in distance running.

Policy implications, Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The extent to which policy recommendation can be drawn from our study, being the first ever of its kind, at this point is limited. It is clear that anti-doping should pay attention to the commercial stakeholders, but it is yet to be worked out how this should manifest in practice. Whilst agents and race directors are not present in every sport, sponsors and their endorsement deals are a financial contributor in almost all sports, and a reward for athletes who make it to the top. However, sponsorships can also be a source of pressure on athletes which needs to be mitigated or managed. The strict liability rule places the burden on athletes to adhere to clean sport principles and comply with the anti-doping requirements, and on top of that, the athletes must compete at a high level to satisfy their sponsors' commercial goals. Among the commercial stakeholders we shined a light on in this study, agents stand out because they are the only ones among the three who have a fiduciary duty to the athlete. The regulatory conundrum in sport governing rules around sport agents (Bull and Faure, 2022) and the absence of bespoke anti-doping policies aside, common law requires sport agents to act solely in the best interest of their clients (Pike Masteralexis 2020, Nixon 2015). This puts agents in the same category as doctors and other healthcare professionals, where the professional duty to the client/patient can clash with moral or legal obligations (McNamee and Phillips 2011, Chester *et al.* 2022). Moving forward, both sport and anti-doping would benefit from clear policy guidance for agents that sets out their roles and responsibilities for anti-doping. Furthermore, WADA should consider adding a module for athlete representatives to the expanding collection of anti-doping education materials in the Anti-Doping E-Learning (ADEL) platform.

In addition, structural level changes are needed to protect athletes and the sport. One such need is a better talent identification and development system in talent-rich but resource-poor countries (e.g., East African countries) to offer a better controlled environment in which

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athletes can progress to professional level and make a living from their talent and hard-work while being protected against commercial exploitation and pressure to dope, at sub-elite as well as elite levels.

Reflections on the state of anti-doping in East African countries are based on a mix of broad personal and vicarious experiences. Participants were recruited based on the role they play in distance running regardless of the profiles/nationalities of the athletes they represent. By virtue of agreeing to be interviewed for this research, the participants demonstrated that they are willing to engage with efforts to understand, and thereby tackle, the issue of doping in professional distance running, and it was clear that they all had some feeling of duty or stewardship towards the sport. The group that was not represented within this study are the commercial stakeholders who take no responsibility for addressing doping. Therefore, a limitation of this study is that it does not provide the first-hand views of commercial stakeholders who do not see anti-doping as part of their role, and therefore the study relies on their colleagues to represent their views, second-hand. Participants from the former group were invited to participate and some did show initial interest in the study and offer some off-the-record contributions, but ultimately declined to take part in the study.

A further limitation of the study is that all participants were male. Although this was not by design, it reflects the demographics within the industry, as most commercial stakeholders in professional distance running are male (World Athletics: Athlete Representatives). Nonetheless, female agents, sponsors marketing managers, and race directors do exist, and thus future studies with female commercial stakeholders will make an important contribution to the field.

The present study opened new research avenues beyond addressing gender representation and differences among commercial stakeholders. Future research should also focus on why certain stakeholders see the need for collective responsibility while others do

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not and should explore the mechanisms that could be put in place to encourage collective responsibility among all stakeholders. An alternative means of exploring a 'higher risk' environment would be to consider the views of those directly impacted and interview athletes about their relationship with commercial stakeholders, including those who have worked under unscrupulous commercial stakeholders who de-emphasise clean sport as well as those who are committed to clean sport to gain a sense of the influence they have.

Lastly, the study was set out to be exploratory and offer the first empirical findings from this group to move towards a theory that conceptualises the role, influence, and responsibilities of this special group of commercial stakeholders in anti-doping. Whilst the socio-economic approach (McLeroy *et al.* 1988) is a useful model to position this study in the athlete environment, it is too broad to capture the balance between good athletic performance and how this is achieved (i.e., with or without prohibited substances or methods), and the unique dynamics between the stakeholders. Segments of the findings resonate with existing theories, such as the tripartite individual-social-environmental responsibility for health (Resnik, 2007) and talent-development models in sport (De Bosscher and De Rycke 2017, De Bosscher *et al.* 2009, 2010, Güllich and Cobley 2017, Truyens *et al.* 2014), and informs models of sponsors' decision about athlete endorsement (Roberts and Burton 2018). Yet, no single theory was able to fully capture the complex interactions and co-dependencies between agents, race directors, and sponsor representatives, and their collective dependencies on the athletes' performances, including the commercially valuable attributes of sporting success such as 'clean', 'exciting', and 'inspiring'.

Conclusion

Reflecting on the sector rather than the sample, the results highlighted that - despite the importance of clean sport for the commercial value, and deep-run interdependencies in benefits from good athletic performance and consequences from doping - not all commercial

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stakeholders take responsibility for anti-doping. For the long-term professional viability of distance running, shared responsibility for clean sport is needed. On the one hand, structural changes at both local and global level are required to effectively tackle doping in distance running. On the other hand, fostering the relationship between all parties is critical, and it is hoped that this paper will bring together the views from the commercial side, and promote introspection and action from the governing bodies.

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Data Availability

The anonymised transcripts are not publicly available and are only accessible to the authors due to the high-profile nature of the participants.

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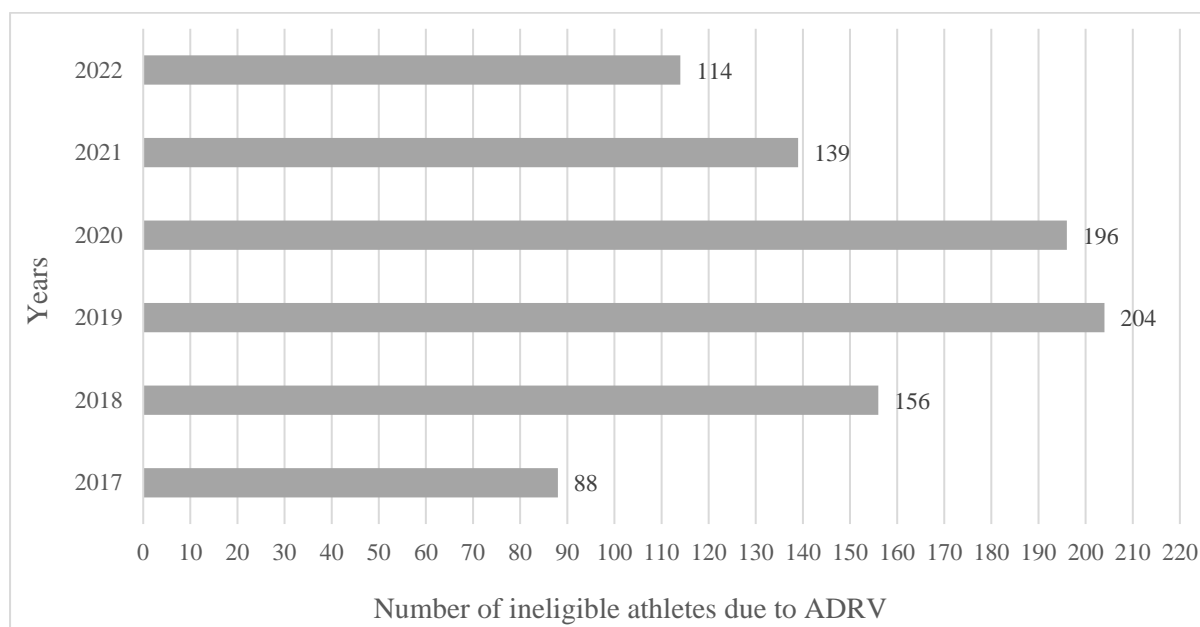
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Supplementary material 1: Sanctions in distance running since 2017

Source: Athletics Integrity Unit: Global List of Ineligible Persons (<https://www.athleticsintegrity.org/disciplinary-process/global-list-of-ineligible-persons>), compiled in September 2022



Notes:

1. The number of athletes shown is the number of currently ineligible athletes for that year, not individuals with new sanctions. For example, one athlete starting a 4-year ban in 2017 appears in 2017, 2018, 2019 and 2020.
2. Records for 2022 are not complete and mostly reflect ongoing ineligibility, not new sanctions.

Sanctions by year (2017-2021)	Total number of sanctioned athletes	Percentage of the total number of sanctioned athletes for the period
2017	88	31.0
2018	80	28.2
2019	87	30.6
2020	20	7.0
2021	9	3.2
TOTAL	284	100.0

Sanctions by sex (2017-2021)	Total number of sanctioned athletes	Percentage of the total number of sanctioned athletes for the period
Female	108	38.0
Male	176	62.0

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TOTAL	284	100.0
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Sanctions by country (2017-2021)	Total number of sanctioned athletes	Percentage of the total number of sanctioned athletes for the period
KENYA	85	29.9
ITALY	31	10.9
CHINA	23	8.1
MOROCCO	19	6.7
ETHIOPIA	15	5.3
RUSSIA	14	4.9
SOUTH AFRICA	11	3.9
FRANCE	8	2.8
BRAZIL	6	2.1
INDIA	6	2.1
UKRAINE	6	2.1
UNITED STATES	6	2.1
ALGERIA	5	1.8
BRUNAI DARUSSALAM	5	1.8
PERU	3	1.1
BOLIVIA	2	.7
GREECE	2	.7
KAZAKHSTAN	2	.7
LESOTO	2	.7
TANZANIA	2	.7
UGANDA	2	.7
AUSTRALIA	1	.4
CANADA	1	.4
COLUMBIA	1	.4
CROATIA	1	.4
EGYPT	1	.4
EGYPT/GREAT BRITAIN	1	.4
ERITREA	1	.4
GREAT BRITAIN	1	.4
GREAT BRITAIN/AUSTRIA	1	.4
HUNGARY	1	.4
IRAN	1	.4
JAPAN	1	.4
LATVIA	1	.4
NETHERLANDS	1	.4
NEW ZEALAND	1	.4
PAKISTAN	1	.4

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QATAR	1	.4
ROMANIA	1	.4
RWANDA	1	.4
SERBIA	1	.4
SINGAPORE	1	.4
SLOVENIA	1	.4
SPAIN	1	.4
SWEDEN	1	.4
TAIWAN	1	.4
TURKEY	1	.4
UNITED ARAB EMIRATES	1	.4
UZBEGISTAN	1	.4
ZAMBIA	1	.4
TOTAL	284	100.0