

Editorial

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Facing Reality: What *Own the Podium* Means for High-Performance Sport

Canada is the only nation in the history of the Modern Olympics to host the Games but not win a gold medal on home turf – twice (!!) (the 1976 Summer Games in Montreal and the 1988 Winter Games in Calgary). Canadians, it seemed, were world class hosts but not committed enough to stand at the top of the Olympic podium.

In 2006, after the International Olympic Committee granted the 2010 Winter Games to Vancouver, the Canadian Olympic Committee and the Federal Government of Canada decided to change that perception, initiating “Own the Podium” – a \$120 million investment in 13 winter sports over a four year period designed to make Canada “the top winter sporting nation in the world” by 2010. A good part of the inspiration for Own the Podium came from the United States Olympic Committee’s “The Forgotten Games” project which infused unprecedented amounts of money into the American winter sports programs helping the US establish a new record for gold medals won by a host nation.

While the failure to win gold in Calgary was disappointing, it was Ben Johnson’s positive test for stanozolol at the Seoul Summer Games later that year that created the most indelible impression of Canada at the Games. The scandal led to an immediate federal government inquiry “into the use of banned substances and practices intended to increase athletic performance,” conducted under the auspice of The Honourable Charles Dubin. After 91 days

of sworn testimony from 119 witnesses, producing 14,817 pages of transcripts, and reviewing 295 exhibits or submissions, Dubin released an exhaustive report containing 70 recommendations. The key to the Dubin report lay in the philosophical foundation upon which he based all of his recommendations – a position that he arrived at after considerable care and a thorough study of world-class, high-performance sport.

By the end of the inquiry, Dubin recognized that Olympic athletes were not amateurs “who competed only for the thrill of competition and the chance of victory.” World-class, high-performance sport involved athletes who “engage in sport on a full-time basis and for monetary reward.” But as much as Dubin recognized all of the modernist, performance-driven realities of world-class, high-performance sport, his overall frame of reference stemmed from the same principles that Coubertin had tried to establish in and through the Games back in 1896. “A commission of inquiry should not dwell solely on the past” Dubin wrote, because little would come from such a narrow focus. One must ascertain what has happened in the past to determine what went wrong and to define the issues but, he noted, “we must now look to the future and seek to correct the errors of the past.” Dubin then presented the fundamental premises upon which he assessed the state of high-performance sport.

The use of banned performance-enhancing drugs is cheating, which is the antithesis of sport. The widespread use of such drugs has threatened the essential integrity of sport and is destructive of its very objectives. It also erodes the ethical and moral values of athletes who use them, endangering their mental and physical welfare while demoralizing the entire sport community.

I have endeavoured to define the true values of sport and restore its integrity so that it can continue to be an important part of our culture, unifying and giving pleasure to Canadians while promoting their health and vitality.

I have also sought to protect and advance the interests of Canadian athletes and have endeavoured to obtain for them a healthy athletic climate in which they can compete honourably in the future, both nationally and internationally, in accordance with the true objectives of sport.

For Dubin, it was the “true values of sport,” “its integrity” and the honour of “the true objectives of sport” that guided his overall assessment of the evidence presented to him and the recommendations he made. At the same time, he could not ignore the realities of late twentieth century, high-performance sport. As a result, in his recommendations, Dubin tried to pull back the forces of modernity, the professionalization of high-performance athletes and the

International Network of Humanistic Doping Research

realities of the Games as an athletic spectacle in which the pursuit of athletic accomplishment, at the outer limits of human performance capacities, drew world audiences and generated political rewards and enormous revenues for specific constituencies in international sport. Dubin placed his recommendations within the context of the Olympic Movement's fundamental principles as they are enshrined in the *Olympic Charter*: the promotion of physical and moral qualities through sport; educating young people through sport to build understanding, friendship and "a better and more peaceful world;" and "to spread the Olympic principles throughout the world, thereby creating international goodwill." According to the *Charter*, Dubin emphasized, the Games "*unite Olympic competitors of all countries in fair and equal competition* [Dubin's italics]." "Unfortunately," Dubin continued, "the noble sentiments and lofty ideals proclaimed in the Olympic Charter are a far cry from the reality of international competition."

Dubin (1990:525) captured the contradictory tensions within the Canadian context as he continued to emphasize the spirit of Olympic competition and how that could justify government involvement in sport as "worthy social and national objectives." "However," he continued, "as the degree of involvement in and funding of sport has increased, there has been a shift of emphasis in the nature and focus of that involvement."

While task force reports and government white papers acknowledge the broad objectives set forth above and the benefit of widely based participation in sport, in fact government support of sport, particularly since the mid-1970s, has more and more been channelled towards the narrow objective of winning medals in international competition. Notwithstanding presentations to the contrary, the primary objective has become the gold medal. This is evidenced by the most recent task force report – *Toward 2000: Building Canada's Sport System* – in which the proposed long-term goal of government funding and the measure of its success are clearly related to the winning of medals.

Dubin (1990:526) maintained that the "changed emphasis from broad-based support of sport for the general community of ordinary Canadians to high-level competitive sport demands a re-examination." Dubin (1990:527) went further in his recommendations – making the first one very clear: "That the mandate for those responsible for administering funds provided by the Government of Canada for sport reflect a commitment to those principles on which government funding of sport was originally based."

Canadian sport policy in the intervening years has struggled against the tide of modernist forces to implement the image of sport that Dubin advocated –

until 2006 when “Own the Podium” set a new course for high-performance sport in Canada. Without any broad discussion or input from those who hold other visions of sport or are critical of the modernist ethos and all of the associated risks and dangers associated with the world-class, high-performance sport spectacle, the COC and Canadian federal government have made a formal commitment to the very sport form that Dubin rejected, with sound reason, in 1990. While there is little doubt, following the 2010 Vancouver Games media coverage, that the (vast) majority of Canadians welcome the change and celebrated, with a new found confidence, the record that Canadian athletes established for the most gold medal victories by a nation at a Winter Games, such a dramatic shift in philosophy requires a thorough reassessment of where Canada stands on a number of critical issues related to the contemporary status of the Modern Games.

Within that discussion, Canadians and Canada’s sport leaders need to focus directly on the real, human athlete at the centre of high-performance sport. The major concern in world-class sport must be the safety of a fully informed, knowledgeable, independent athletic person who is free to make choices. To accomplish that, Canadian policies on high-performance sport need to consider the implementation of the harm-reduction strategies that are becoming increasingly widespread in the field of public health.

Short of dismantling the entire Olympic project, world championships, Grand Prix events, and the national systems of athlete development as they have evolved to the present point in time; disbanding the armies of applied sport scientists, chemists, technology experts, medical and paramedical personnel who support the quest for increasingly high-risk, athletic performances at the outer limits of human capacity; replacing a well entrenched spectator thirst for athletic mega-spectacles and the media and corporate appetite for the financial rewards that accrue for covering and sponsoring athletic performances of an increasingly incredible magnitude with some other entertainment forms, then one must accept the reality that athletes’ health and safety is at risk and will become increasingly perilous. The use of every available practice designed to enhance athletic performance is well entrenched in high-performance sport – now that more and more nations are seeking to own the podium, it is time to abandon old philosophies and establish policies that will genuinely protect athletes’ health and safety.

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