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Commentary: Experience of Salt Lake Olympics shows why ban of Russian team is justified

Russian athletes are suffering at the hands of a corrupt Russian Olympic Committee that has been failing and harming its athletes for years.



Speed skaters train at the Gangneung Oval during a training session before the 2018 Winter Olympics in Gangneung, South Korea, Wednesday, Feb. 7, 2018. (AP Photo/John Locher)

By Robert Weiner and Brad Star | For The Tribune • 4 days ago

We won't see Russian uniforms at the Winter Olympics that open this week, but we'll hear the country's representatives and leaders complain.

On Dec. 5, the International Olympic Committee announced that Russia would be banned from the 2018 Winter Olympics in South Korea due to the nation's "systemic manipulation" of anti-doping rules, which were first exposed during the drug busts of the 2002 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City. However, Russian athletes who manage to prove themselves clean have been invited to compete in Pyeongchang as "neutral" athletes.

The Court of Arbitration for sport, recognized by all Olympic bodies and sports, overruled the IOC's ban on many individual athletes last week, despite the evidence including photos of holes in the testing labs to pass through false fluids and the former head of the Moscow anti-doping lab admitting "a hole for clean fluids" and his country's committing "an unprecedented attack on the integrity of the Olympic Games and sport."

As the Russian foreign ministry celebrated the ban's overturn, the Russian lab head, Grigory Rodchenko, is now under U.S. witness protection. There could be as many as 200 Russian athletes under the neutral flag. That court cannot control country labels (an IOC decision), which is so important to Russians. So at least the world still will have that, because the IOC and World Anti-Doping Agency (and the United States) want not just punishment but a message of clean sport.

The Russian athletes will not be associated with any Russian symbols, and the Olympic anthem will play at any medal ceremonies for Russian athletes.

Russia has a history of state-coordinated PED (performance-enhancing drugs) distribution. In partnership with local law enforcement, the 2002 Salt Lake Winter Games stayed clean by punishing juicing athletes. Three Russian skiers were exposed during the 2002 Games and were stripped of their medals. The Salt Lake City Games were the first Winter Games after the creation of the World Anti-Doping Agency in 1999 and have since become a model in striving for a cleaner Olympics.

The IOC's current decisions took courage. During the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, Russia tampered with the urine samples of more than 100 of its athletes to conceal widespread steroid use. Russian scientists swapped out hundreds of drug-laden urine samples, using the secret hole in the lab. The media ran photos of the hole.

In the 2016 Summer Olympics in Rio de Janeiro, 111 out of 389 Russian competitors were disqualified a day before the Opening Ceremony.

Documents obtained by the IOC in 2016 exposed a plot for a statewide Russian doping system in track and field as preparation for the 1984 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles. By her vote to ban Russia last year, USATF delegate to the World Track meeting (IAAF) Stephanie Hightower helped lead the way for first IAAF, and now the IOC, to take the current strong action.

Current Russian athletes are suffering at the hands of a corrupt Russian Olympic Committee (ROC) that has been failing and harming its athletes for years. Major Russian players banned from the IOC's eligibility list include biathlon racers, figure skaters and speed skaters

Russian sports doping as a way to cheat is part of a culture of anything goes to add grandeur to the nation. After FIFA (world soccer) President Sepp Blatter was accused of taking bribes to give the 2018 World Cup to Russia, and later was thrown out of FIFA for doing so, Russian President

Vladimir Putin said that Blatter “must be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.” The Olympics Russian anti-doping lab head implicated “Putin specifically” for the culture of the state doping policies.

Sixteen years after Russia was first exposed during the Salt Lake City Games, the IOC has finally made the right decision in banning the nation from the Olympics. The IOC must maintain its harsh stance against cheating countries. Olympic viewers will see and hear a lot of feigned claims of Russia’s innocence despite decades of evidence against them.

WADA founder Dick Pound of Canada, former U.S. drug czar Gen. Barry McCaffrey, and USADA founding chair/olympic marathon champion Frank Shorter created the clean sport and transparency objectives of WADA today, and they can be proud. The Olympics got this one right and must stay strong about it to send the right message. Salt Lake City led the charge.

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