

The Salt Lake Tribune

Robert Weiner and Abby Paras: COVID focus threatens Olympic performance-drug enforcement

Salt Lake City model for doping enforcement still needs to be followed



(Alexander Zemlianichenko | AP file photo) In this Tuesday, May 24, 2016, photo an employee of the Russia's national drug-testing laboratory holds a vial in Moscow, Russia.

By Robert Weiner and Abby Paras | Special to *The Tribune*
June 12, 2021, 11:00 a.m.

The International Olympic Committee decided to allow Russian athletes to compete in the 2021 Olympic Games as independent athletes while banning the country's official participation in the Games because of state doping scandals. Top athletes like America's Michael Phelps are expressing concern over how clean the Games will be.

The Olympics in Japan begin on July 23. It's COVID, not drugs that the IOC appears to care about this year. That could lead to a cheating Olympics. Phelps, the all-time most decorated Olympic swimmer, said he'd "give Tokyo 4 or 5 out of 10" on how clean he thinks this year's Games will be.

Due to COVID, Japanese officials banned foreign spectators from coming to the Olympics, and are considering events “spectator free.” According to the World Health Organization, Japan has only vaccinated around 7% of the population so far, and COVID cases are accumulating. The AP reported that this will not affect virus-protected American athletes from attending, and the Games are set to be at full athlete capacity. Meanwhile, the State Department has issued a warning discouraging Americans from traveling to Japan prior to the Olympics to prevent a surge back home of COVID-19.

There will be 15,000 athletes competing in the Olympics in Tokyo, consistent with previous years, and close to 250 will hail from Russia. Though the Olympics are set to make \$1.45 billion from NBC license agreements this year, concerns arose about the cost and logistics of drug testing so many athletes repeatedly leading up to the Games. IOC estimates put it at around \$180 million for the year. Lower testing numbers corrupt the integrity of the Games.

In 2020, the World Anti-Doping Agency already decreased drug testing for athletes by nearly half, going from 305,881 tests in 2019 to only 168,256 in 2020. Moreover, there is no accounting for the athletes who were doping throughout 2020 through recently and avoided testing while training.

Due to earlier embarrassments when vials were thrown out, as in Atlanta, the United States has recently pushed for transparency in testing, and the Salt Lake City Olympic Games were an example of this. When it comes to other countries, there could be many disqualifications and embarrassments for the Games.

For example, with less testing before the games, and with the new 5-day limit for pre-arrivals, there could be many disqualifications missed by not testing longer before the Games as in the past. However, this could also expose Russian and other athletes for doping mere days before they compete or during the competitions themselves.

Forcing them to compete as independent athletes under the “Olympic Athletes from Russia” name did not deter some athletes from doping in 2018 in South Korea’s games. Two curling competitors including a bronze medalist failed drug tests right after their events.

While many view the Salt Lake City Olympics in 2002 as the ideal way to deal with doping, the circumstances for 2021 are different. The IOC teamed up with Salt Lake City authorities to more strictly review and test athletes, and as a result, they held Russia accountable for their use of PEDs. However, given the already difficult task of hosting the Olympics in a global pandemic, drug testing among athletes has slowed due to cuts on the WADA.

The director of the non-profit International Testing Agency, Ben Cohen, which implements anti-doping for major sports events, said that “in a normal Olympics 90% of athletes are in the village so it makes it easier to test them pre-competition.” However, in Tokyo, athletes will only be permitted to enter the Olympic Village five days before their event. Not only will the constant changing of athletes make testing more difficult for the

WADA team that has been cut by 20%, but it will also be harder to reach athletes for testing before their events.

Dr. Thomas Hildebrandt, an expert on how athletes slip through the cracks to cheat, stated that it is easier for athletes to use performance-enhancing drugs if they know that they will be tested only a few days before the Olympics. He said, “A lot of athletes get done with their doping before they’re at high risk for testing.” As rules are now allowing testing when they get there only five days before competing, athletes will still be able to gain a physical advantage.

Especially since it was already pushed ahead a year, Tokyo’s Olympics will draw the world’s eyes. Protecting Japan from a severe COVID-19 outbreak should take the first, but not only, priority. It is crucial that the medals, records and integrity of the Olympic Games be protected.

With \$1.4 billion in advertising, virtually all athletes vaccinated, and COVID on the wane, the Olympics could spend significantly more both on rigorous pre-Games out-of-competition drug testing and testing at the Games themselves to preserve the equality and honor of the Games and their records. Let’s assure that the world’s media are covering a legacy that endures.



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