

## WHY IT'S BETTER WE DON'T DISCUSS ANTIDOPING

And yet, I'm doing it again

**Every user of performance- and image-enhancing drugs is, of course, one too many. As a part of the fitness industry, which is based on the idea of maintaining and improving your health, we are trying to tackle the issue by means of raising awareness. Please note, unlike the world of sports, we are not just talking about performance-enhancing drugs – we don't only want to get rid what's on the WADA list, we want to discourage usage of all performance- and image-enhancing drugs (PIEDs). That's because our focus is on health, rather than on unfair advantage. Nevertheless, NADO (the National Anti-Doping Organisation) performs regular checks in Flemish gyms. And, you might ask, why?**

NADO Flanders operates under the directives of the Belgian Antidoping Decree. Despite the fact that gym-based activities are not included in the decree covering organised sport, they are deemed to fall under organised sport within the Antidoping Decree, which legitimises checks at gyms.

### **Is healthiness so important?**



When checks are performed in gyms as a way to discourage PIED usage and underscore the health-consequences, we can only applaud. When that is the effective underlying reason, one would expect that the same controlling body would provide all the support it could to the fitness industry's awareness campaigns. But that is not the case. A striking example can be found in the fact that the

Flemish Community funds 82 top athletes, but when Fitness.be called for support for its PIED campaign ([www.lievereenkusje.be](http://www.lievereenkusje.be)) through the sport administration body, not a single one of those athletes responded. That is a troubling thought.

If the health of sportspeople is so important, why are checks limited to those performance-enhancing drugs that are found on the WADA list? Surely the excessive intake of sugars, fats and alcohol is just as bad?

If we wish to put everything into proper perspective when it comes to healthcare, why are not all drugs placed under scrutiny. A recent Australian study demonstrated that PIEDs cause much less damage to users and their environment than other drugs. PIEDs is the collective name for steroids, growth hormones, EPO, ephedrine, etc.

IF we were to honestly look at what is 'unhealthy' for us, then we must understand that recreational practitioners have other priorities. What follows is a brief summary:

- Nutrition in general
- 64% of Belgians gamble, with 368,671 of them playing on legal gambling websites. Meanwhile, 467,081 Belgians are at-risk or problem gamblers. And who is the biggest sports sponsor? Gambling sites.
- Some 540,315 Belgians have a drinking problem. What's the name of the Belgian first division football competition? The Jupiler League.
- Then there is the fact that 14% of Flemish people between 15 and 64 experiment with cannabis, while 30,000 people used cocaine in the last year and 22,500 took opiates with another 30,000 taking ecstasy or amphetamines.
- And we haven't even mentioned the use of legal drugs: according to a 2013 survey, almost a million Flemings of 15 or older have taken a psychoactive drug (sleeping pills, sedatives or antidepressants). We have no idea how many of them are becoming reliant on these drugs because... oh well, it is on prescription. How many painkillers are sportspeople consuming?

### **Focus on fitness, not sport**

Could it be the case that checks in gyms are not intended to be preventative, are not designed to protect one's health, are not in the general interest of gym-goers? Could it be that the sole purpose is to shift the focus to fitness and away from the sports world and what is or could go wrong there?

In that respect, I refer to a conclusion reached by Bert Wagendorp :

*Sport is being increasingly run like a business. Major football clubs are being bought by investors instead of by football-lovers.*

*Negative publicity caused by cheating, such as doping, match fixing and corruption, are harmful to the market value. All stakeholders are affected, including sponsors, broadcasters, club owners and organisers. Just like the top athletes, they benefit from a clean image. This is in essence not on moral grounds, but due to financial interests. What is done to reduce the risk of damage? Control from the inside. American pro basketballers and the professional tennis circuit are both great examples of self-government, and mostly that means little or lax screening: they don't want to catch athletes doping. That's bad for their image... especially their commercial image.*

*That's why Ben Wagendorp refers to cycling as a 'dumb sport'. Cycling officials test for doping more frequently and use better checks, consequently catching out many more of the athletes. But the paradox is that this has not improved the sport's image, it has actually worsened it. And the result is that sponsors drop out.*

*The smart sports want to protect their icons from a tarnished image, and not because of moral needs but because of the demands of the free market.*

*Multinationals will do anything to ensure that their top brands (Bolt, Federer, Messi, Lebron, etc) do not suffer the damage that cycling inflicted upon Armstrong. They want sporting bodies with a strict and controlled PR policy and*

*internal control systems to combat doping and match fixing where the outcomes are never released.*

Could it be that this is the reason why attention has been shifted to the world of fitness?

### **A different approach**

We work together with our clients to improve their health, but the authorities and their bodies have never seen it that way. Or they simply don't want to see it that way, because focussed checks at gyms embellish the numbers and remove the glare from sports.

Why is fitness the only field of sport where amateurs are screened outside of competition? Why are recreational cyclists, martial arts practitioners and others not checked?

If the publication of checks results in stigmatising those caught, then something doesn't make sense. And that's where we are today. We can continue to protest, but there is not much point. What we can however do is choose a different approach.

*We can stop talking about doping, and talk instead about performance- and image-enhancing substances. We can abandon the antidoping charter and instead adopt a health charter. Instead of punishment we raise awareness, even outside of the walls of the gym. We demonstrate that, to us, health is the top priority. Checking for and punishing cheating may have become a way of life in the world of sports, but not for us. Nothing is more honest than an individual who takes responsibility for their own actions and health, and a great industry that helps them to do so. That is our industry.*

Keep fit,

Eric

Eric Vandenabeele

eric@fitness.be