

Doping, corruption, match-fixing - darker corners of sport

The silence of gay athletes, doping, human rights issues ahead of the Beijing Olympics...these and more were the passionate concerns of delegates at the world meet on sports and society in the Iceland capital.

At the fifth edition of 'Play the Game' that ended here last week, hundreds of media professionals, academics and officials in world sport met over five days to discuss corruption, doping, political abuse, changing lifestyles and a number of other challenges to modern sport.

Outgoing World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) president Richard Pound said a coalition against corruption in sport should be considered very seriously.

'Time has come for sport to also consider a coalition against corruption in sport more consciously and overtly than it does today,' Pound told IANS.

'We have to confront the problem of doping and not manage it. The sport doping market is increasing and becoming more vigorous. Criminals are constantly looking at ways to expand the use of doping substances.'

With new substances such as the so-called intelligent versions of the blood booster erythropoetin (EPO), biosimilars like dynepo and autologous transmission of blood making their advent, some felt the market would be flooded for the Beijing games next year that could mark a difficult future for sports.

Nowhere has doping been more prevalent than in the beleaguered cycling sport.

For starters, the German Cycling Federation (BDR) has decided that all professional cyclists riding for German teams must submit to a control system using blood profiles by 2007.

Pat McQuaid, president of the Cycliste International (UCI), also known as the International Cycling Union, said the body was discussing the use of GPS (Global Positioning System) for keeping a check on the whereabouts rules for professional cyclists.

'I think drug use was more widespread in cycling in the 1980s and 90s and as a sport it did not move with modern science as it should have,' he told IANS, hoping the gap on cheats in cycling would narrow down.

Statistically, about 10 percent of all athletes are homosexual, but very few dare to talk about it in the open, says Roger LeBlanc of Canada's Moncton University and refers to the phenomenon as 'the conspiracy of silence of gay athletes'.

'Many homosexuals stop doing sport in their teenage years because they feel tyrannised or left out by their team players. In defiance of that, homosexuality is getting more acceptable in society, it doesn't seem to be the case in the athlete world. Primarily in male contact team sports,' he said.

LeBlanc's research involved interviewing 15 rugby players in New Zealand.

The persecution of Falung Gong practitioners in China was also an issue raised at the conference and many felt that the International Olympic Committee had to be galvanised to allow the organisers of the 2008 Games to let every person irrespective of their spiritual or religious beliefs to compete.

Participants also took a critical look at the workings of football's governing body, FIFA.

Investigative journalist Andrew Jennings gave 'Play the Game' an account of his ongoing probes into alleged corruption at FIFA's highest levels, including what he saw as the organisation's increasingly desperate attempts to cover up bribes paid to the bosses of a now-defunct Swiss marketing company, International Sport and Leisure (ISL).

'A Swiss police investigator, Thomas Hildebrand, is leading an investigation into ISL that has begun to implicate FIFA itself,' said Jennings.

Despite the fact that FIFA withdrew its lawsuit against ISL and called for the investigation to be halted, Jennings said Hildebrand went on digging and in May 2005 indictments were issued against ISL executives.

'FIFA president Sepp Blatter likes to give the impression that he is determined to stamp out corruption - but if Hildebrand finishes the job, this image could be destroyed forever'.

Conference director Jens Sejer Andersen said: 'No one knows the exact extent of corruption in sport, but experts estimate that we only hear about five percent of all cases - the rest is hidden. One of the key objectives is to throw light into some of the darker corners of sports governance.'

'Ten years ago, when we held our conference, neither doping nor corruption was regarded as issues that required thorough reflection and debate, and taking them up publicly was considered an insult to the holy movement of sport.'

Two events in 1998, the Festina doping scandal in Tour de France and the exposure of corruption in the International Olympic Committee, were a rude awakening to the sports world.

But while doping is now taken seriously by an increasing number of people, corruption in sport is still taking place in plain view of the media without much in the way of intervention.

'On the contrary, corruption seems to be growing in its many forms - match-fixing, trafficking, money laundering, secret commissions and outright bribery, to name a few,' Andersen said.

'Play the Game' is an independent institution aiming to strengthen the basic ethical values of sport and encourage transparency and freedom of expression in world sport.

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