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Title: Proposal to disregard athletics world records prior to 2005: a radical and misjudged initiative

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The recent announcement that the European Athletics Council has proposed to disregard all athletics world records set prior to 2005¹ has caused considerable controversy and debate among the athletics community. It is a radical initiative with commendable aims to redress the consequences of past undetected doping violations that may have led to some of the least attainable world records. This proposal has now been put to the world governing body, the International Amateur Athletics Federation (IAAF), and its merits require discussion.

A major suggested justification for the proposal is that the IAAF has stored blood and urine samples only since 2005. As a consequence, there is limited recourse to disprove the legitimacy of performances prior to 2005 unless compelling new corroborative evidence emerges, as was the case for the cyclist Lance Armstrong. This seems unlikely when conclusive evidence of doping and admissions of guilt are not forthcoming despite widely known practices of state-sponsored doping.² Therefore, the proposal has some merit for expunction of world records that may have been set with the aid of illegal performance-enhancing drugs. Nevertheless, there are many iconic world records set prior to 2005 such as Jonathan Edwards' 1995 triple jump distance of 18.29 m, Mike Powell's 1991 long jump record of 8.95 m and Paula Radcliffe's world record of 2:15:25 for the marathon.³ Memorable, inspirational performances from athletes such as Radcliffe would, therefore, also be purged from athletics' official history, despite their long-time advocacy of drug-free performances.⁴ It seems a double punishment for clean athletes who have competed against and overcome drugs cheats to now lose their world records.

Whatever action is taken, all records are part of history, official or not, and are examples of human attainment. To expunge records unilaterally is to ignore exceptional achievement in an outcome-focused sport where new world records represent a milestone of what is both special and possible.^{4 5} To expect athletes, coaches and the public to set aside such exceptional prior achievements is to ignore a fundamental principle of a sport based on running the fastest, or leaping or throwing the furthest. Although exceptional performances will remain part of athletics folklore, to remove them from the official list of records tarnishes the reputations of the athletes concerned. The scientific community also has an obligation to discuss these processes to provide authoritative and evidence-based contributions to the debate. Further work is required to evaluate both retrospective and prospective anti doping processes and policies.

The aim of starting the history of world records from a time when blood and urine samples were available should be commended for its intent, but the aspiration appears flawed. Many cases of failed drugs tests are not upheld due to chain of custody issues, storage inadequacy, cross-contamination and possible degradation of samples, all of which become more likely as time passes. To revisit a blood or urine sample held since 2005 and expect prosecution for a doping violation could be considered unrealistic and open to legal challenge.

Since 2005, there have been new world records set but numerous doping violations with estimates of failed tests from the London 2012 Olympics being upward of 60 individuals, a substantial increase on the 31 positive cases from the Beijing 2008 Olympics.⁶ Most cases have been upheld, while others have been overturned due to complex factors such as therapeutic exemption, or as a result of insufficient evidence, disputed mitigating evidence or failures in the testing or analysis procedures.

Nevertheless, it is clear that widescale cases of doping still exist post-2005. A WADA report released in 2015² detailed an extensive Russian state-sponsored doping programme implicating athletes, coaches, various Russian institutions, doctors and laboratories. The report stated that the London Olympic Games ‘were, in a sense, sabotaged by the admission of athletes who should have not been competing’. In 2015, the IAAF banned all Russian athletes from competition in response to allegations of state-sponsored doping.

Other complex challenges for the IAAF will not be addressed by setting an arbitrary date for resetting all world records. These challenges undoubtedly include protecting the rights of athletes to take part in fair competition. The participation of intersex athletes, for example, presents a challenge that may yet lead to further redress of world records. Genetic testing of women over five Olympics indicates genetic gender abnormalities in 27 out of 11 373 women tested.⁷ There is currently no longer a limit on testosterone for intersex women despite that this would almost certainly lead to a meaningful performance advantage. The IAAF would need to consider whether it is fair for a XY chromosome athlete to be eligible to compete in a race of XX chromosome athletes.

In conclusion, the performances of athletes are the product of genetic endowment, hard work and the contribution of science. Contemporary leaders have the responsibility to document important milestones in the sport, and the history of athletes making performance breakthroughs. The pre-2005 records are part of the sport’s history,⁸ and it is impossible to now retrospectively prove the innocence of individual athletes. The initiative by European Athletics is certainly provocative, but it stains the reputation of all athletes pre-2005 by introducing an arbitrary threshold date that may need to be reset in the future as new detection techniques emerge. It therefore attempts to address the serious issue of drugs in sport with an overly simplistic and ill-conceived strategy.

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