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4  
5 **Title**

6 **Whose Job is it Anyway? A Qualitative Investigation into the Influence of Agents, Race**  
7 **Organisers, and Sponsors on the Risk of Doping in Elite Distance Running**

8  
9 **Abstract**

10 Agents, race-organisers, and sponsors have a key influence in shaping the world of elite  
11 professional distance running. Yet to date this important but hard-to-reach stakeholder group  
12 has been omitted from the global research landscape of doping and anti-doping. The purpose  
13 of this study is to address this gap in the literature and explore the systematic contributors to  
14 doping in elite long-distance running, along with potential solutions to this issue, from this  
15 influential perspective. Thirteen in-depth interviews were conducted with agents ( $n = 8$ ) of  
16 world-class long-distance runners, major race organisers ( $n = 3$ ), and sports marketing  
17 managers ( $n = 2$ ) for global brands. The interviews were conducted via the phone, audio-  
18 recorded, and transcribed verbatim. Reflexive thematic analysis generated three themes  
19 which focused on: 1) The framework of professional distance running and the contextual  
20 aspects which may contribute to doping risk; 2) the impact of various recruitment strategies  
21 on doping and anti-doping; and 3) the lessons that can be learnt from the participants' first-  
22 hand experiences with doping cases and/or managing anti-doping requirements. Reflecting on  
23 the sector rather than the sample, the results highlighted that not all commercial stakeholders  
24 feel responsible for anti-doping. Collective responsibility from all stakeholders, which is  
25 currently borne by some and not others, is necessary to minimise doping in distance running.  
26 The challenge is how to convince all stakeholders of their share of responsibility.

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28 **Keywords:** anti-doping, elite sport, athletics, athlete representatives, sponsor, product  
29 endorsement

## COMMERCIAL STAKEHOLDERS AND ANTI-DOPING

31 Within athletics, distance running and road running feature the highest relative proportion of  
32 adverse analytical findings (Aguillar-Navarro et al., 2021). Professional distance running  
33 over the past 25 years has been dominated by Kenyan and Ethiopian athletes (Nikolaidis et  
34 al., 2017). Physiological, genetic, and/or biomechanical factors may all contribute to this  
35 domination (Larsen & Sheel, 2015; Tucker et al., 2015) and certainly the annual world  
36 rankings for distance running events indicate an enormous talent pool in Kenya, Ethiopia, and  
37 more recently Uganda. There may also be social factors behind their success, such as high  
38 motivation to achieve economic success (Jarvie & Sikes, 2012), and environmental factors,  
39 such as abundant high-altitude locations with year-round favourable weather for training  
40 (Wilber & Pitsiladis, 2012). However, some now feel that doping may also be contributing to  
41 this success, because Kenyan runners have been frequently charged with Anti-Doping Rule  
42 Violations (ADRVs) in recent years. At the time of this study, 61 Kenyan distance runners  
43 serving bans for ADRVs (Athletics Integrity Unit, n.d.). Ethiopian and Ugandan distance  
44 runners have also been implicated, albeit to a lesser extent, with 13 Ethiopian and 2 Ugandan  
45 athletes on the global list of ineligible persons. Placing these numbers in context, a total of  
46 196 athletes were suspended for ADRVs in 2020 (Athletics Integrity Unit, n.d.). Further  
47 detailed statistics are offered in Supplementary material 1.

48 The relatively high number of sanctions in Kenya and Ethiopia points to influences  
49 beyond intra-individual factors (Blank et al., 2016; Ntoumanis et al., 2014). Instead, it  
50 suggests systemic issues in the athletes' environment. The influence of various individuals  
51 within an athlete's environment on doping risk has been studied previously, from peers in  
52 team sports (Allen et al., 2017; Aubel et al., 2019; Mallia et al., 2016), to coaches (Barnes et  
53 al., 2022), parents (Erickson et al., 2017), physicians (Backhouse & McKenna, 2011), and  
54 other athlete support personnel (Barkoukis et al., 2019, Mazanov et al., 2014). The  
55 importance of the athlete environment on doping behaviour has long been recognised in  
56 academic research (Hauw, 2013; Hauw & Mohamed, 2015; Shelley et al., 2021; Petróczi et  
57 al., 2017; Petroczi et al., 2021). However, one aspect which is often taken for granted in  
58 empirical investigations into doping and anti-doping is what constitutes 'the system'. The  
59 question of what are the boundaries of the athlete environment that exerts an influence on the  
60 athlete's choices and actions when it comes to rule-breaking or rule-following, has rarely  
61 been addressed.

## COMMERCIAL STAKEHOLDERS AND ANTI-DOPING

62           Setting up this exploratory study, we generally worked from a socio-ecological  
63 perspective. Whilst an athlete’s primary support is important, in elite distance running, and  
64 some other professional sports such as professional road cycling, triathlon and boxing, there  
65 are other individuals who may play an equally important role in shaping doping risk within a  
66 particular sport. Adopting McLeroy et al.’s model (1988), Figure 1 depicts a multi-level  
67 socio-ecological system of anti-doping that surrounds athletes in professional sports where  
68 athlete representatives (agents), race or event organisers, and sponsors (collectively  
69 ‘commercial stakeholders’) are integral parts of the athlete environment. This  
70 conceptualisation goes beyond the athlete’s direct environment of team-mates, friends, family  
71 and the typical entourage of coaches, doctors, physiotherapists, nutritionist, psychologists,  
72 and lifestyle coaches; and includes another personal layer representing the business aspects of  
73 their sport, especially the agents, before the macro level of institutions, organisations, and  
74 global policies. This extended scope raises a different viewpoint, namely how responsibility  
75 for clean sport and anti-doping compliance might look like beyond the athletes’ strict liability  
76 rule.

77           The World Anti-Doping Code (WADA, 2021), and its acceptance by approximately  
78 700 sport organizations, as well as other global initiatives such as the Council of Europe’s  
79 Anti-Doping Treaty (1990) and UNESCO’s Anti-Doping Convention (2007), signal long-  
80 standing political will to protect the fairness of sport. Further initiatives have moved beyond a  
81 singular focus on doping, such as the Council of Europe’s Macolin Convention which aims to  
82 tackle the manipulation of sport competition (Council of Europe, 2014), and UNESCO’s  
83 Kazan Action Plan (UNESCO, 2017) which aims to create EU-level coordination for tackling  
84 threats to the integrity of sport.

85           The criminalisation of doping and associated acts, such as trafficking, abetting, or  
86 conspiring, is a tool that has been patchily employed by governments around the world. The  
87 116th Congress of the United States voted for the Rodchenkov Anti-Doping Act (2019) to  
88 protect US sport and athletes from organised doping at an international sporting level. Certain  
89 other countries have also passed laws criminalising various types of doping related offences,  
90 with Kenya being one of them in 2016, following a stream of doping scandals among its  
91 world-class distance runners. National level legislations variably impose sanctions on athletes  
92 for use (typically under fraud and not controlled substance laws), or on anyone in the  
93 athlete’s environment for the production and trafficking of doping substances, or the abetting,

94 conspiring, or covering up of doping (Murphy, 2013; Reznik et al., 2020). Notably, making  
95 the doping of athletes a criminal offence is not universally supported in the anti-doping  
96 community (Cordeo, 2022; Kornbeck & Kayser, 2018) or by the World Anti-Doping Agency  
97 (WADA). WADA's objection is specifically with regard to criminal sanctions for athletes  
98 who dope and appears to be borne out of a wish to maintain global harmonisation of the anti-  
99 doping rules. WADA note that the current sanctioning process of athletes who commit  
100 ADRVs is accepted by all the governments of the world. However, WADA themselves are in  
101 favour of governments introducing laws to penalize those who are putting banned substances  
102 into the hands of athletes and acknowledge that criminal legislation has been effective in  
103 catching athlete support personnel (WADA, 2015 cited in full in VeloNews, n.d.).

#### 104 **The Structure of Professional Distance Running**

105         Due to the dominance of East African athletes in distance running, what happens in  
106 these countries reflects on the sport as a whole. Professional distance running is a unique  
107 sport in many ways. The unique aspects include the financial and commercial structure of the  
108 sport, the dominance of East Africa with a rich talent pool but poor resources for talent  
109 development, and the interdependency of athletes, athlete representatives (agents), sponsors  
110 and race organisers for athletic and commercial success.

#### 111 *Athletes' Income Sources*

112         In long distance running, the primary sources of income for a professional athlete are  
113 prize/appearance money paid by major races, and endorsement deals with running shoe  
114 manufacturers. In the 1990s there was more money to be earned by distance runners in track  
115 races, however, there has been a decline in these opportunities as professional 10000m track  
116 races have almost vanished from the calendar. Conversely, the amount of money available to  
117 long distance runners in road races and big city marathons has increased over the same  
118 period. This has resulted in young, particularly East African, runners deserting the traditional  
119 career path in which one races primarily on the track through the teens and 20s before  
120 moving to road races in the latter part of a career, and instead focussing on road racing from  
121 the outset. North American, European, and Australasian runners, who may be less motivated  
122 by money (Elbe et al., 2010; Jarvie & Sikes, 2012; Onywera et al., 2006; Wilber & Pitsiladis,  
123 2012), or may have more alternative sources of funding outside of prize money, have largely  
124 continued with a more traditional career progression.

125           The second main source of income for distance runners are endorsement deals from  
126 shoe manufacturers, which have been dominated globally by Nike and Adidas. Other brands,  
127 such as Asics, New Balance, Saucony, and Brooks, have invested in certain markets at certain  
128 times but have up to now have had a limited presence in East Africa. Emerging brands in the  
129 running market, such as Hoka One One, On, Puma, Reebok, Skechers, and Under Armour,  
130 also sponsor a small number of athletes and groups, but mostly in the USA. The contracts that  
131 athletes sign with shoe companies can vary widely, with the very best runners being paid  
132 seven figure sums annually, whereas upcoming runners receiving merely a supply of kit and  
133 shoes (Gault, 2018).

### 134 *Talent identification and development in East Africa*

135           The talent identification and development policies adopted by various countries and  
136 sports are diverse in approach (De Bosscher, 2018). To the best of our knowledge, there have  
137 been no macro-level analyses of talent identification and development in East African  
138 countries to date. Within Kenyan distance running specifically, talent identification and  
139 development does not appear to be driven by a coherent national policy for elite sport  
140 development (Kanyiba et al., 2015), although grassroot level sport systems do operate in  
141 Ethiopia and Kenya (Kamenju et al., 2016; Otieno & Omidé, 2020). At the elite level, the  
142 commercial interests of outside entities such as sponsors and agents are influential in  
143 harnessing the rich talent pool and favourable training conditions and translating that into  
144 global success.

### 145 *Stakeholders with commercial interests*

146           Within distance running, the decisions on which athletes are invited to the most  
147 prestigious and richest races are made by the race directors or elite athlete coordinators for  
148 those races. The decisions on which athletes receive endorsement deals are made by the  
149 marketing managers for the shoe companies. The deals between races/sponsors and athletes  
150 are usually negotiated on behalf of the athletes by their agents. The agents are also  
151 responsible for identifying and recruiting talented athletes, and sometimes for creating the  
152 infrastructure to support the athletes, such as setting up training camps, and organizing  
153 coaching/physiotherapy. These three ‘commercial stakeholders’ control how money flows  
154 through professional long-distance running. They also have a strong influence on athletes’  
155 development, earning potential, and actual earnings, which in turn impacts athletes’

156 approaches to optimising their performances. One shared characteristic of these stakeholders  
157 is their vested commercial interests in both the athletes' performances under their contracts,  
158 and in maintaining an image of the sport that is attractive to customers and fans.

### 159 *Re-thinking the boundaries of the environment for doping and anti-doping*

160 Context matters because doping does not occur in a vacuum. In their 2018 editorial,  
161 Backhouse et al. (2018) defined the 'dopogenic environment' to acknowledge the impact of  
162 opportunities and conditions in the athlete's surroundings that promote doping, and to shift  
163 the focus from individual morality, ethics, and shortcomings to highly influential interactions  
164 between athletes, their social and support networks, and the organisational structures in which  
165 decisions about athletic performance, and performance-enhancement, take place. The extent  
166 to which an environment may be 'dopogenic' has been demonstrated in the McLaren Reports,  
167 which detailed the evidence of state-sponsored doping in Russia (McLaren, 2016a; 2016b), a  
168 decade of rule violations by officials in weightlifting (International Testing Agency, 2021).  
169 These reports depict a sporting culture that makes doping easy and relatively risk free, or  
170 even in which it would have been very difficult for a top-level athlete *not* to dope. The ripples  
171 of these major incidents have impacted sport and anti-doping on a global scale (Heiberger et  
172 al., 2021; Ohl et al., 2021a; 2021b; Read et al., 2020; Wagner & Storm, 2021).

173 Notwithstanding the limitation of the commercial stakeholder segment to certain  
174 sports (e.g., athletics, professional road cycling, boxing, triathlon, and tennis), agents, race  
175 organisers, and sponsors' athlete managers deserve attention in anti-doping research. Being  
176 positioned between the athlete and governing bodies, their role is unique because they can  
177 equally amplify or buffer the top-down anti-doping directives (Filstad, 2014; Hope, 2010;  
178 Radaelli & Sitton-Kent, 2016; Teulier & Rouleu, 2013). They can protect or exploit athletes  
179 with their strict or permissive approach to performance enhancement (Backhouse et al.,  
180 2018), and play a pivotal role in the level of pressure that athletes experience and might  
181 manage with the use of prohibited substances (Didymus & Backhouse, 2020, Siebert, 2020).  
182 The question that must be asked is what role, if any, do the financial structure of elite  
183 distance running and the influence of agents, sponsors, and race directors have on doping risk  
184 in the sport.

### 185 **Aims**

186 To date, there is an absence of empirical studies which have examined how  
187 commercial stakeholders perceive the issue of doping, and/or how they act to minimise the  
188 risk of doping. This study, therefore, seeks to address this gap in the literature, and in doing  
189 so, to reveal an important perspective on the causes and potential solutions for doping in this  
190 sporting context, by addressing the following research questions: 1) How is doping in elite  
191 distance running perceived by the agents, race organisers, and sponsors who work in the  
192 sport?; 2) What actions are taken by the agents, race organisers, and sponsors to influence  
193 doping-risk in distance running?; and 3) What future actions could be taken by agents, race  
194 organisers, and sponsors to further influence doping-risk in distance running?

### 195 **Methodology**

196 To address the broad, exploratory, and differing nature of the research questions (e.g.,  
197 perceptions, actions taken, future actions) a generic approach to qualitative inquiry was used  
198 in the current study. Consistent with this approach, the current research was guided by  
199 interpretivism. This interpretivist positioning is based on the existence of multiple individual  
200 realities and a belief that knowledge is subjective and co-constructed between the researcher  
201 and participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Poucher et al., 2020). The primary aim of  
202 research, therefore, is to understand and interpret the world from the participants' point of  
203 view (Sparkes & Smith, 2013). With this in mind, it is important to note that the first author  
204 is a competitive distance runner and played the role of a 'passionate participant' (Sparkes &  
205 Smith, 2009, p.10) in uncovering the meaning that the participants (i.e., individuals working  
206 in professional distance running) ascribe to their experiences (Poucher et al., 2020). Having  
207 an 'insider' status meant the first author was able to have comprehensive and wide-ranging  
208 conversations with the participants and thereby examine the meaning that they ascribe to the  
209 problem of doping.

### 210 **Participants**

211 To address the research questions, the inclusion criteria included any individual from  
212 one of the following three groups; 1) race directors or elite athlete coordinators for  
213 professional road or track races; 2) sports marketing managers for running shoe companies;  
214 and 3) athlete representatives registered with World Athletics (i.e., "agents"), with a focus on  
215 those representing world-class long-distance runners. Following institutional ethical approval  
216 participants were recruited (via personal contacts and social media) from across the world  
217 using criterion-based sampling (Patton, 2014). Informed consent was obtained from all

218 participants and the final sample ( $n = 13$ ) were all male, aged between 34 and 72 ( $Mage =$   
219  $49$ ) and had between 9 and 37 years ( $Mean = 22$  years) of experience working in a  
220 professional capacity in distance running. This excludes any years that the participants spent  
221 competing as professional distance runners (which five of them did) and focuses on time  
222 spent in organisational roles. The sample included individuals who had served numerous  
223 roles within the sport – such as a race director turned global sports marketing manager for a  
224 prominent American running shoe company, and agents who also serve as race directors,  
225 coaches, commentators, film directors, and statisticians. Going off their current primary roles,  
226 the sample comprised agents ( $n = 8$ ), race directors ( $n = 3$ ), and sports marketing directors for  
227 shoe brands ( $n = 2$ ).

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### 229 **Data Collection**

230 Ethical approval for the study was granted by the Faculty Research Ethics Committee,  
231 Faculty of Science, Engineering and Computing, Kingston University (approval received on  
232 06/09/2020, approval number: 1637). Following this, telephone interviews were used to  
233 collect data due to the high-profile nature of the participants, sensitive nature of the topic  
234 (i.e., causes and potential solutions for doping), and participants being spread across the  
235 worldmaking face-to-face interviews logistically difficult (Sparkes & Smith, 2013). A semi-  
236 structured interview guide was developed to address the research questions and refined  
237 throughout the data collection process. The interview guide was split into three main topics  
238 and modified for agents, race directors, and sponsors. The first topic was perceptions of  
239 doping/anti-doping in elite distance running (e.g., “do you feel there is more or less doping in  
240 elite distance running now, compared with 20 years ago?”), the second topic focused on  
241 current actions to promote clean sport (e.g., “is there anything that you do within your role to  
242 try to minimise the risk of doping and to promote clean sport?”), and the third topic centred  
243 around future actions to promote clean sport (e.g., “outside of the work of the Athletics  
244 Integrity Unit and the NADOs, what can others within distance running do to make the sport  
245 cleaner?”). All interviews were conducted by the first author and lasted between 37 and 188  
246 minutes ( $Mean = 58$ mins).

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### 248 **Data Analysis**

249 The interview audio-recordings were professionally transcribed verbatim. The  
250 transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Reflexive thematic  
251 analysis was specifically selected because of its emphasis on the subjectivity of the



252 researcher, as well as for its concerted engagement with the data during interpretation (Braun  
253 & Clarke, 2019; 2020). The six-phases of reflexive thematic analysis were conducted by the  
254 first author. During phase one the transcripts were carefully proofread while listening to the  
255 audio-recordings, to promote familiarity with the content. The subsequent inductive coding of  
256 the data made up phase two of the analysis and was conducted manually via adding semantic  
257 codes in the transcript margins (see Trainor & Bundon, 2020). Analytical notes were also  
258 made during this phase focusing mostly on underpinning meaning and commonalities  
259 between participants. Similar codes from across transcripts were amalgamated and then  
260 grouped into subthemes and themes during the third phase of analysis, and in phase four, the  
261 data set was viewed as whole set of themes to determine whether the structure made sense.  
262 During this process, the themes and subthemes were printed out and spread across a table, to  
263 better visualise and re-order the connections between them (see Trainor & Bundon, 2020).  
264 An example of an initial code was ‘Marketing value for Nike is to have the winners wearing  
265 their shoes, regardless of doping concerns’; the corresponding subtheme was ‘Nike’s ‘Win at  
266 all Costs’ attitude’, and this was ultimately grouped into the broader theme of ‘Recruitment  
267 Strategies’. At this stage the second and third authors acted as ‘critical friends’ (Smith &  
268 McGannon, 2018) and encouraged reflexivity by challenging the first author’s construction of  
269 knowledge. Phase five involved further reflecting on and clearly defining the themes. The  
270 selection of appropriate quotes to support each theme and the write up of the results section  
271 concluded phase six of the data analysis.

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### 273 **Quality criteria**

274 The quality of the current study can be judged using a ‘relativist’ approach (Sparkes &  
275 Smith, 2009), in line with the first author’s interpretivist philosophical position. This involves  
276 formulating a list of characteristics for the unique purpose of the study and methodological  
277 approach used, and then using this list to evaluate the particular form of qualitative research,  
278 rather than using a universal set of criteria (Sparkes & Smith, 2009). To judge the current  
279 study, the following criteria may act as a starting point: Firstly, the system behind doping in  
280 elite distance running is a relevant, timely, and significant issue, as depicted in the  
281 introduction (i.e., *worthiness of the topic*). Secondly, the recruitment of a previously  
282 unstudied group of participants (i.e., agents, race directors, shoe sponsors) who engaged in in-  
283 depth interviews ensured *rigour* and *novelty* and produced rich data on the causes and  
284 structural drivers of doping. Further to this, the second and third authors provided feedback  
285 and reflections on the data throughout the analytical process (i.e., ‘critical friend’; Smith &

286 McGannon, 2018). Participants were also offered the opportunity to review the results and  
287 feedback their own interpretations of the data (i.e., member reflections and ethical practice)  
288 and confirmed they were all comfortable with the way in which their views had been  
289 portrayed. *Methodological coherence* is evidenced through a consistent philosophical  
290 position (i.e., interpretivism) across research questions, data collection methods (i.e., semi-  
291 structured interviews) and analysis (i.e., reflexive thematic analysis).

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### Results

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All the participants interviewed in this study have been involved with long-distance running for most of their lives, and now work in influential roles within the sport. Following a thorough analysis of the data, three main themes, each with subthemes, were co-constructed. The first theme captures the framework of professional distance running and delves into certain contextual aspects which may contribute to doping risk. The second theme is about the impact of various recruitment strategies, and the third theme illustrates the lessons that can be learnt from the participants' first-hand experiences with doping cases and/or managing anti-doping requirements.

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#### **The Bigger Picture: The Context around Doping in Professional Distance Running**

In this theme, the participants give some perspective regarding where the problem of doping sits within the broader challenges for the historical, but slightly unfashionable, sport of professional distance running. Views on the effectiveness of the international governing body, World Athletics, naturally follow on from this, and participants also emphasised how the multiple roles served by many influential figures can create damaging conflicts of interest. The following three subthemes expand further on the participants' views on these issues.

#### ***Fix Doping to Fix the Sport, or Fix the Sport to Fix Doping?***

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Participants felt less able to enjoy a world-class distance running performance now, as compared to the past, because of their increased uncertainty over whether performances may have been pharmacologically enhanced. They expressed frustration that they, and everyone else, have been robbed of the sense of wonder that was once associated by watching the fastest runners in the world, and which has now been replaced by doubt and scepticism. Participant 2, a race director for one of the biggest marathons in the world, felt that:

318 “When you look at the number of athletes who won the event and were then  
319 subsequently disqualified because of doping positives, I believe this has continued to  
320 destroy the public belief that anyone who is running at the front is likely to be a cheat...  
321 I think that we may be moving to a position, in the next 20 years, where if doping is not  
322 stopped, there will stop being money in distance running and that, in itself, will solve  
323 the issue.”

324 However, some other participants felt that elite distance running is already so unpopular as a  
325 spectator sport, that the incentive to tackle doping as forcefully as is necessary is not there;  
326 the investment of money and human resources that it would take to restore the integrity of  
327 distance running would only be worth it if there were a commercially viable sport to fight for.

328 An area of agreement between the participants was that the popularity of distance  
329 running is significantly hindered by suboptimal marketing and structuring. In many cases, the  
330 participants felt that the changes needed to make the sport more popular would also make it  
331 cleaner. For instance, some participants suggested that there is currently an unhealthy  
332 obsession on fast times. Races that are geared towards fast times tend to be less interesting,  
333 because there is less chance of the drama of an upset or unexpected result. And races that are  
334 won in fast times also perhaps favour the doped athletes, as explained by participant 5, who is  
335 a world-leading agent and coach:

336 “The drugs give more of an advantage in fast races when there’s pacemakers because  
337 that is just a fitness test. But the drugs won’t make you any better tactically, and so in  
338 a championship race, it is of greater importance to actually be a good competitor”

339 Some major marathon race directors came to the same conclusion as participant 5 and  
340 explained how they now have a more considered approach to the assembly of elite fields.  
341 Instead of exclusively targeting fast times and world records where pacemakers set a  
342 consistently fast pace from the beginning, thus reduce the contest to a purely physiological  
343 affair (in contrast to un-paced races where tactics and skill are also important), they recruit  
344 diverse and interesting elite fields that they hope will produce tight and exciting races.

345 Another challenge that is almost unique to distance running is that access to the  
346 highest-level competitions is fairly unrestricted – if you are fast enough, you will get a place  
347 in a big race quite quickly. Certain participants felt that if you were to define a smaller elite

348 pool of athletes who would compete in a series of the main competitions, then the fans could  
349 get to know the athletes better and become more invested in following their progress  
350 throughout the season. It was noted that a by-product of creating such a defined pool of  
351 athletes would be that anti-doping would become more targeted, and thus more effective.

352 *World Athletics: A Little Better all the Time*

353 The body responsible for implementing the wholesale changes necessary to both  
354 minimise doping risk and better promote the sport is World Athletics. However, the recent  
355 history of corruption within World Athletics has not been forgotten by the participants. There  
356 is a lingering mistrust of the governing body, partly due to the shocking nature of the  
357 exploitation (e.g., extorting money to cover up doping), and also the continuing presence  
358 within the governing body of individuals who worked there at the time of the corruption.

359 With that said, most participants felt that the establishment of the AIU was a positive  
360 move, and that the AIU have improved anti-doping within athletics. Participants felt that the  
361 AIU's increased emphasis on investigative work was producing a more targeted testing  
362 programme and in turn leading to more cheats being caught. The introduction of an out of  
363 competition drug testing funding scheme for road races, which now sees agents, races, and  
364 athletes financially contributing to anti-doping, was also generally felt to be a constructive  
365 AIU initiative.

366 One misgiving about the recent work of the AIU, raised by agents and one sponsor, was  
367 that the Athlete Biological Passport (ABP) could be generating ADRVs for innocent athletes.  
368 There was concern that the athletes were not being given a fair opportunity to defend  
369 themselves in these cases, because of the complexity of the ABP and the AIU having a  
370 monopoly on the relevant experts that would be needed on both sides for an impartial  
371 decision. Participant 8, a highly experienced agent, explains how the sense of unfairness felt  
372 has a knock-on effect on stakeholder buy in to the push for clean sport:

373 "To me, the AIU's strategy showed that they just wanted to win a case, they were not  
374 interested in the truth. You want to find out how people can contribute, to take a role to  
375 educate athletes and to help the athletes not to dope. But if I do that and somebody, in  
376 my opinion, is accused wrongly, and I don't feel we had a fair chance to defend  
377 ourselves, why the fuck would I care?"

378 *Quid Pro Quo Maintains the Status Quo*

379         Some participants were reluctant to support all AIU initiatives, and that reluctance was  
 380 borne out of the perception that conflicts of interest still exist all the way up to the very top of  
 381 the sport with the President of World Athletics, Lord Sebastian Coe. The AIU are  
 382 operationally independent of World Athletics, but still financially dependent on World  
 383 Athletics. Coe had ties to Nike for 38 years before resigning from his ambassadorial role after  
 384 mounting criticism; but some participants felt that Coe still lacks impartiality and criticised  
 385 what were viewed as acts of preferential treatment towards certain athletes and companies.  
 386 This was seen as a barrier to bringing the community together in a truly collective effort to  
 387 fight doping and was cited by one global brand manager as a reason contributing to their  
 388 decision not to assist with the funding of the AIU.

389         For others, the key conflict of interest is that many of the parties involved in  
 390 professional distance running have a vested interest in maintaining good relationships with  
 391 one another. It was explained that agents depend on race directors to secure invitations for  
 392 their athletes to the races, and race organisers depend on agents to supply high quality  
 393 athletes for their elite fields. There is a resulting unwillingness to be critical of one another, or  
 394 to hold one another to account on matters such as anti-doping. These issues can become yet  
 395 more conflicted when the same company or individual serves a dual role as both agent and  
 396 race director, as is the case for many of the major races around the world. The participants  
 397 had major reservations about this situation, as expressed by participant 11, an agent who  
 398 represents numerous top East African marathon runners:

399         “The reason I'm not going to piss off a lot of my other management colleagues is  
 400 because I rely on them to get my athletes into their races, which they organise. There  
 401 are certain key agencies which you just don't get on the wrong side of because,  
 402 ultimately, they're going to say yes or no to a particular athlete getting into a  
 403 marathon... and if they don't like you, they'll just say no. I think if you're a manager,  
 404 you should not be organising elite fields for races. I think that is a big problem... And  
 405 it is a bit ridiculous sometimes when you see the manager for an athlete negotiating  
 406 with himself to put a fee and a structure down, and then taking a percentage. I don't  
 407 think that's right... but that's just the nature of the sport at the moment.”

408 Further to this, an issue that was particularly pertinent for the shoe companies was that when  
 409 a major race is sponsored by a rival shoe company, their sponsored athletes are often

410 excluded from competing in that race. Given that many major races around the world are  
411 sponsored by shoe companies, some felt that this was an obstruction to fair access to  
412 competition.

### 413 **Scoping out Doping: Recruitment Strategies Influence Doping Risk**

414 The careful recruitment of athletes that could be trusted and believed in was a central  
415 strategy employed by agents, race directors, and shoe sponsors, to promote clean sport.  
416 Correspondingly, the careless recruitment of athletes by all three parties was felt to be a  
417 significant driver of doping in professional distance running. This phenomenon is explored in  
418 more detail through the three subthemes below.

419

#### 420 ***You are the Company you Keep***

421 Race directors and shoe sponsors described the concrete steps that they have taken to  
422 minimise the risk of doping. Shoe sponsors spoke about the inclusion of a clause within each  
423 athlete's contract that allows the contract to be immediately suspended upon initial  
424 notification of an ADRV, and then terminated if the ADRV is confirmed. Race directors  
425 spoke about paying for in competition doping controls at their events and contributing money  
426 towards out of competition testing programmes. Furthermore, the majority of shoe sponsors  
427 and race directors interviewed implemented a zero-tolerance policy, meaning that an athlete  
428 who has previously served a doping suspension would never again be offered a contract with  
429 their shoe companies or be invited to compete in the elite field of their races.

430 On top of these tangible measures, all participants spoke about the more inexact science  
431 of trying to weed out possible dopers from their brands/races/agencies via careful and  
432 deliberate recruitment. Because the participants are insiders, deeply embedded in the world of  
433 elite distance running, they are well placed to make judgements about which athletes are  
434 more likely to be doping. These judgements are based upon numerous factors, often related to  
435 the athletes' associations and progression, rather than their outright performance level. An  
436 extremely high level of performance was not, in and of itself, seen as an indicator of doping –  
437 in fact most participants had a fervent belief, based on athletes that they have worked closely  
438 with, that an extremely high level of performance is possible without doping. However, high  
439 level performances in association with other factors, such as an association with 'shady  
440 characters', or an extreme progression, were deemed suspicious and generally would lead to  
441 such an athlete being avoided. Participants accepted that this method is not infallible and that

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442 there are sometimes athletes who will dope that they could not have predicted, and sometimes  
443 athletes that they would avoid due to concerns about doping who have not doped.

444 Some participants spoke about taking this strategy one-step further, and excluding not  
445 just suspicious athletes, but entire agencies or training groups that have dubious reputations.  
446 Participant 4, the elite athlete coordinator for a major marathon, spoke about how such a  
447 policy has worked in practice:

448 “We’ve never made a public announcement that we’re not going to work with a  
449 certain agent, but we have told people, ‘You have not shown that we can trust you  
450 right now, your athletes have not shown that we can trust them, and we need to take a  
451 little break’, and we have done that. That has meant something in the industry; other  
452 agents, other representatives have sat up and taken notice of that. I don’t believe that  
453 our events have suffered without these athletes or without these agents’ athletes in our  
454 race.”

455 Some shoe companies too have opted not to offer contacts to athletes working with certain  
456 agents or have used their influence to steer their sponsored athletes away from agents and  
457 coaches with bad reputations, and towards the safer choices.

### 458 *Nike’s ‘Win at all Costs’ Attitude*

459 Not all companies place such a high importance on assessing the likelihood of doping  
460 of the athletes and agents they choose to work with. The approach adopted by Nike was a  
461 frequent topic of discussion, due to their prominence as perhaps the largest global investor in  
462 professional distance running. A majority of participants viewed Nike as a company that have  
463 adopted a ‘win at all costs’ business model, who will sign the best and fastest athletes without  
464 being overly concerned about whether those athletes are doping. This is perceived to be a  
465 long-standing strategy implemented from the top down within the company. Particular  
466 reference was made to Nike’s decision to re-sign Justin Gatlin after the conclusion of his  
467 doping ban as an example of this policy in practice. The participants could understand why  
468 Nike have adopted this stance - as put by Participant 5, “Nike are not in the business of  
469 promoting track and field or clean sport, they’re in the business of selling shoes”. And the  
470 view was that generally when an athlete sponsored by Nike does get banned for doping, there  
471 is not too much of a negative impact on the brand itself, as they are not generally seen as  
472 being directly involved with the doping. This is explained by participant 3, who currently

473 works as an event organizer and was previously the senior sports marketing manager for a  
474 rival running shoe brand:

475 “There’s very little downside for big brands. Say you sponsor some athlete who goes  
476 and wins all these gold medals, that makes everybody love your brand because you  
477 have the fastest people on the planet, your product must be amazing, and it must be  
478 the fastest stuff and it’s so elite. There’s an aura around your brand because of the  
479 athletes you have. And then they go and get caught for doping years later. You made  
480 all your money, you got all your publicity and now if you want to you can just stand  
481 back and go, ‘Well we had nothing to do with this, we didn’t know this was  
482 happening.’...”

483 The marketing value for Nike in having runners cross the finish line in first place is viewed as  
484 outweighing whatever detrimental impact the company may experience following doping  
485 scandals down the road.

486 ***Success as an Agent in Distance Running: A Numbers Game?***

487 Most agents in this study described their careful recruitment approach, based on long-  
488 term development of talented and committed young athletes, with a meaningful relationship  
489 built up over time between agent and athlete. These agents naturally tend to work with  
490 smaller numbers of athletes and can therefore monitor their athletes more closely. However,  
491 an alternative approach favoured by other agents also exists; one in which large numbers of  
492 athletes are recruited and supported. Participant 13, one of the younger agents in the study,  
493 gives his observation of this dichotomy:

494 “[Agency Name] obviously have a huge budget from Nike to support that number of  
495 athletes. And when a company like Nike is giving you that much money to win  
496 medals and win world marathon majors, well you kind of need to support that many  
497 athletes because the pressure is there to achieve and to find that athlete... I guess the  
498 reason why I would not support doing things the way [Agent Name] does is that I  
499 want to know the athletes who I’m working with. Who’s that athlete that signed that  
500 piece of paper with my name on it and my company name on it? But that’s the way he  
501 chooses to do it and he’s produced a lot of athletes that have won a lot of medals and  
502 won a lot of major races. Unfortunately, he’s also had a lot of doping cases to go with  
503 that.”



504 None of the participants knew of any agents that were actively involved in assisting athletes  
505 to dope. However, the perception was that certain agents must be aware that there are likely  
506 dopers within their agency, but they do not look too closely or ask too many questions. One  
507 agent described a former colleague as: “He’d be against drugs, but if somebody takes them  
508 and doesn’t get caught, then he’d say that’s bad from the ones testing them.” There was a  
509 range in how the participants felt about this type of ‘hands-off’ approach to athlete  
510 management. Some felt that it was utterly unacceptable and that if you're a professional  
511 working in the sport, you should know if one of your athletes is doping, and if one of your  
512 athletes tests positive, you should suffer a ban too. Others felt that managing large numbers  
513 of athletes was a legitimate business model and that within such a business model, doping  
514 positives are an inherent risk. The majority opinion was that agents should do all they can to  
515 prevent doping, but that they cannot always be held totally responsible if the occasional  
516 doping case does occur within their group.

#### 517 **Doping: The Causes and the Solutions**

518 The majority of participants have first-hand experience of one or more athletes that they  
519 have worked with or recruited, being sanctioned with an ADRV. This theme explores the key  
520 drivers of doping in this specific population, and the correct response to take to punish those  
521 behind the doping and prevent recurrences. The following subthemes below expand on the  
522 participants’ views.

523

#### 524 ***Poor and Desperate, Rich and Dishonest***

525 Some of the more experienced agents in the study spoke about how the competition  
526 among agents to sign the best athletes in some countries has increased. For instance, agents  
527 felt there are many more agents working in Kenya than there used to be in the late 90s/early  
528 00s, and furthermore, the working model has changed. Previously, the agents would recruit  
529 young athletes from the junior championships, then the athletes would develop on the track  
530 circuit, before eventually moving up to the marathon later in their careers. Now agents are  
531 signing athletes and sending them straight to major city marathons, because that is where the  
532 money currently is in the sport. This change has led to some agents stepping away from the  
533 representation of Kenyan athletes, such as participant 7:

534 “Part of the whole thing with Kenya, why I didn’t want to do it anymore, was because  
535 of that free for all among agents and athletes, I just didn’t want to be associated with it.  
536 So having spent lots of time in Kenya and worked with some great individuals and

537 made great friendships, I made a choice to move away from that... I just didn't like the  
538 atmosphere anymore."

539 The punishment for doping (i.e., being banned from sport) was not always felt to be  
540 enough of a deterrent to doping, given that the benefits of doping could be to win an amount  
541 of money that would change some athletes' lives forever. The shrinking of various budgets  
542 and the cancellation on numerous races in the wake of Covid-19 was felt to be another  
543 exacerbating factor, creating a situation where the same population of athletes are competing  
544 for a smaller pot, leading to an even greater pressure on the athletes to perform.

545 It was felt that the idea to dope was rarely coming from the athletes themselves, but  
546 from the husbands/boyfriends of female athletes, or other coaches/brokers/associates looking  
547 to use the athletes to make money quickly, as explained by Participant 12, an experienced  
548 agent who has worked with many top Ethiopian and Kenyan athletes over the past 20 years:

549 "The athletes don't come into athletics to dope, they run because they love athletics,  
550 maybe some of them see the business opportunity in athletics, maybe they're  
551 passionate, or maybe some people are born to run... it's the coaches who corrupt them  
552 down the road, or some middle people or boyfriend or husband or broker, etc"

553 Another 'branch' of cheating was also discussed at length, and that was the use of non-  
554 prohibited drugs to enhance performance. This included the misuse of Therapeutic Use  
555 Exemptions, or the use of novel and undetectable performance-enhancing substances. The  
556 participants were of the unequivocal view that this kind of behaviour amounts to cheating,  
557 because an unfair advantage is gained, and felt that the people who do these things have  
558 various ways of justifying their behaviour to themselves, none of which the participants  
559 deemed to be valid. The driver again appears to be desperation, but, in this case, desperation  
560 born out of ego satisfaction rather than poverty.

561

562 ***Fool me Once, Shame on you; Fool me Twice, Shame on me***

563 Of the three groups of commercial stakeholders that make up the participants in the  
564 current study, it is the agents who are most closely tied to the athletes, and they are therefore  
565 the ones who take the most blame if an athlete tests positive under their management. The  
566 way in which an agent reacts to a positive case was felt to be significant.

567 When faced with an ADRV within their agency, the agents in this study felt that it  
568 was essential for them to collaborate with the doping authorities to get to the bottom of how  
569 the doping came to take place, so that measures can be put in place to prevent it from  
570 happening again. This can be very challenging, as explained by participant 11:

571 “I didn't believe what he was telling us, so we tried to explain to him that if he  
572 cooperated and brought about some understanding of how it happened, then he might  
573 get a reduction on his four-year ban. I know there had to have been people around him  
574 that assisted him to do what he did. But he was denying any knowledge or  
575 responsibility. That was frustrating because what we're trying to do is root it out and  
576 understand how this would happen. Even if he had wanted to cooperate, he had a lot  
577 of pressure, most likely from the people that knew what he was doing, for him not to  
578 cooperate. I've heard of instances where they will pay the athlete sometimes just to be  
579 quiet and, therefore, they'll get paid not to say anything.”

580 Some participants felt that criminal investigations would be more effective at rooting  
581 out the serious doping offenders, while others felt that a financial penalty would help to  
582 disincentivise doping. Lifetime bans for dopers were also favoured by many of the  
583 participants, as it often sat uncomfortably seeing athletes who had returned from doping bans  
584 winning big races again.

585 One recurrent area of discussion was whether it would be justified to impose  
586 sanctions on agents who had multiple athletes within their agencies testing positive. The  
587 sample were split on this point, and several commented that though they may support such a  
588 sanction in principle, it would be difficult to enforce legally, given that it would be hard to  
589 prove that an agent was involved in the doping. However, official sanctions were not always  
590 felt to be strictly necessary, as it was noted that the sport could effectively ‘self-police’; if all  
591 the major sponsors and races decided not to do business with a certain agency because of  
592 repeat doping offences, then that agency would very quickly be out of business. Here it was  
593 noted that it is actually the races and the sponsors who can drive change, as they are the ones  
594 who hold the purse strings.

595

596

### **Discussion**

597 This study aimed to expand the immediate athlete environment to include the  
598 commercial stakeholders, who have a strong influence on athletes’ livelihoods and earning  
599 potential. We also sought to understand the actions taken by the participants in the best  
600 interests of clean sport, and gathered their thoughts on the causes of, and best solutions to, the  
601 issue of doping. Due to the life histories of the participants, many of whom competed as  
602 athletes themselves and have filled multiple roles in the sport, they were able to offer a broad  
603 view of the problem of doping and had well-formed and articulate views on how it could be

604 improved. Without exception they all spoke openly and candidly, being appreciative for the  
605 opportunity to discuss this prominent issue in distance running.

606

607 ***'The Sport is on its Knees': The Lack of a Coherent Professional and Commercial***  
608 ***Structure for Elite Distance Running Allowed Doping to Flourish***

609 Even though the participants are all passionate and lifelong distance running 'people',  
610 there was a good deal of pessimism expressed about its current state. The challenges faced by  
611 the sport are not unique; weightlifting, for example, has been hit perhaps even harder by  
612 doping and corruption issues, with the result being that weightlifting may be removed from  
613 the Olympic programme for the 2028 Games. Key stakeholders identified three crucial  
614 changes required for a way forward for weightlifting, namely: governance reform, cleaning  
615 up doping, and making the sport more interesting (Oliver, 2022). These three points were also  
616 raised in the present study, in relation to professional distance running, with a consensus that  
617 two of these - governance reform and effective anti-doping measures - are moving in the right  
618 direction. However, according to the participants, the third aspect, modernising and re-  
619 popularising professional distance running, does not seem to have made as much progress.  
620 Moreover, the participants highlighted the relationships and reciprocities between the three  
621 factors. Specifically, good governance is critical for both effective anti-doping, and a sound  
622 commercial strategy. Equally, an improved commercial structure can promote doping free  
623 distance running and doping free distance running would make the sport more commercially  
624 successful. To give just one example from this study - major city road races that see  
625 marketing/commercial value in their elite races have more impetus to ensure that their races  
626 are 'clean' and are thus more incentivised to contribute to anti-doping. If the elite races  
627 become irrelevant sideshows to the money-making mass participant races at major city  
628 marathons, then these powerful stakeholders will be less inclined to invest in anti-doping.

629 Clearly, changing the marketing structure of distance running would not eliminate  
630 doping. Changes which are required for the long-term financial health of elite distance  
631 running may have the desirable side effect of marginalising the doping and dopers, squeezing  
632 them out of the bigger and better paying competitions and sponsorship deals, and generally  
633 creating an environment in which doping is less tolerated and thus likely. The other obvious  
634 advantage of commercial and financial success is that the more money there is coming into  
635 professional distance running, the more there will be to put towards anti-doping initiatives.

**636 Talent identification and development in the global distance running market**

637 From the commercial stakeholders' accounts, two talent management model has been  
638 identified. Based on their key characteristics, characterized by a '*Found & Nurture*' (FN) or a  
639 '*Natural Selection*' (NS) pathway. The FN model, which was followed by the agents in this  
640 study, represent an entrepreneurial, small business approach with focuses on fewer number of  
641 talents but closely manage their individual development to ensure that they reach their  
642 predicted potential. In a business sense, this model is a high-risk high-reward strategy. In  
643 contrast, the NS model, adopted by the sponsors, can be characterized as a low-risk high-  
644 reward model where a large initial talent pool is created, and athletes are equally supported  
645 but no individualized attention is offered. The level of responsibility taken by the sponsors  
646 and their responsibilities is limited but this approach is costly. Although there were only two  
647 sponsor representatives which makes the applicability of the findings limited, it appears that  
648 on the personal level, they were not fully comfortable with this approach but felt a pressure  
649 from above to follow this path.

650

**651 *Working Within the System but Calling for Changes at Structural- and Policy Levels***

652 The dynamic between social responsibility, love of the sport, and commercial  
653 interests led commercial stakeholders in this study to work within the existing sporting and  
654 anti-doping system, but also offered valuable insights into how to change the systems for the  
655 better. High level global initiatives for protecting the integrity of sport signal a strong  
656 political will. However, with all good intentions, these initiatives are a world apart from the  
657 reality of elite sport in developing countries, with distance running offering a prime example  
658 of this disconnect. Participants in this study felt that there is still frustratingly little achieved  
659 in addressing the suppliers and facilitators of doping after each new positive test. What could  
660 have a more lasting impact on doping in this environment is the further investigation and  
661 breaking up of the aiders and abettors of doping. To achieve this, more clarity and global  
662 harmonisation is needed around the powers granted to the relevant authorities to investigate  
663 the facilitators behind doping.

664 World Athletics have recently introduced new regulations around minimum testing  
665 requirements, due to concerns over the high number of doping cases from certain countries.  
666 Rule 15 of the World Athletics anti-doping rules now states that athletes must have been  
667 subject to at least three out of competition tests in the lead up to major events (e.g., Olympics  
668 or World Championships), and currently only applies to athletes from Belarus, Bahrain,

669 Ethiopia, Kenya, Morocco, Nigeria, and Ukraine. These regulations may bring some rigour to  
670 distance running at the elite international level, but they will not affect doping in East African  
671 countries at the national level (Chebet, 2014; Lenten et al., 2017) where athletes not only  
672 compete for the medals and national pride, but for professional race opportunities and  
673 sponsorship deals (Ogama & Sakwa, 2019). On the corporate side, there are measures  
674 currently adopted by several of the main sponsors of distance runners that produce a financial  
675 disincentive to doping, such as the policy not to work with athletes who have previously  
676 served a doping suspension. One can assume that if an athlete were to have very limited  
677 possibilities to earn money from the sport upon returning from a ban, then they would be less  
678 likely to attempt a comeback. Therefore, such policies, if universally adopted by all major  
679 financial contributors, would mean that a doping suspension essentially serves as a life ban  
680 from the money-making, professional side of distance running. This could be significant,  
681 since previous research suggests that financial sanctions are a greater deterrent to doping than  
682 a ban from sport (Overbye et al., 2015; Westmattmann et al., 2018; 2020). Lenten and  
683 colleagues go even further when they propose a conditional superannuation scheme for  
684 tackling doping (Lenten & Smith, 2020, Lenten et al., 2017)

685         If there were a significant stock market reaction each time a doping case were  
686 reported, that would unequivocally induce a reaction from a big corporation. It is  
687 hypothesised in a recent review on corporate misconduct (Carberry et al., 2018) that investors  
688 are more likely to react negatively when the media presents clear and credible information  
689 that the company was in some way responsible for the misconduct, and that the misconduct  
690 was the result of deeper organisational problems. Therefore, it may be necessary for the  
691 media to shift focus away from the athletes banned for doping, and towards the companies  
692 they are supported by, to compel those companies to change their approach. However, some  
693 companies, notably Nike, do not adopt such a policy and have re-signed athletes following  
694 doping suspensions, as highlighted by their decision to re-sign twice-banned sprinter Justin  
695 Gatlin in 2015. As explained in the results section, this is because there is no significant  
696 reputational or financial damage to a big brand, if one of their athletes is found to be doping.  
697 This has also been shown to be the case in cycling – a 2016 study assessed the impact of 25  
698 doping scandals on the relevant cycling team’s primary sponsor’s daily stock return, and no  
699 significant impact was observed (Danylchuk et al., 2016). A more recent study, in which  
700 Danish managers from companies sponsoring cycling teams were interviewed, went further

701 still, and suggested that doping scandals can occasionally even can be advantageous for  
 702 sponsors because it made cycling a cheap sponsorship opportunity (Wagner & Iversen, 2022).

703 In the absence of collective goodwill, there is also a need for mechanisms to  
 704 encourage collective responsibility via legislation (e.g., criminalisation of assisting,  
 705 encouraging, aiding, abetting, conspiring, covering up) and bylaws (e.g., banning  
 706 sponsors/agents/race directors for assisting, encouraging, abetting, conspiring, covering up).  
 707 Throughout the history of anti-doping, many of the major breakthroughs into the systems  
 708 behind doping have resulted from law enforcement actions made possible by national-level  
 709 legislation prohibiting various aspects of doping facilitation (e.g., Operacion Puerto,  
 710 Operation Aderlass, The Okagbare/Lira Doping Case, etc.). Clearly, a support personnel who  
 711 is supplying drugs to an athlete will not themselves return a positive doping test. Therefore,  
 712 the catching and sanctioning of support personnel depends on alternative methods to an  
 713 analytical test, such as search warrants, phone tapping, forensics, paper trails, and informants.  
 714 For these methods to be deployed, there must be legislation in place allowing their use in the  
 715 correct circumstances. WADA have been able to harmonise the anti-doping rules governing  
 716 many of the major sports across the world. Their next challenge, if taken upon, is to convince  
 717 governments around the world to introduce consistent laws that increases investigative  
 718 powers for the uncovering of doping facilitators. The observed trend of expanding anti-  
 719 doping to a broader scope of sport integrity in many anti-doping organisations (e.g., Sport  
 720 Integrity Australia) and sport federations (e.g., in athletics, tennis, biathlon, gymnastics, etc.)  
 721 may facilitate this development.

722 **Moving Forward with Collective Responsibility**

723 Each commercial stakeholder has a unique relationship with the athlete, whose  
 724 performance they all benefit from financially. Agents and sponsors through their recruiters  
 725 and representatives are in direct contact with the athletes under their contracts. Race  
 726 organisers are a step removed from the athletes' personal environments because they don't  
 727 have direct involvement in the athlete's development, but they do provide the platforms  
 728 where athletes, and their agents, can achieve sporting and financial success. This symbiotic  
 729 operation is best paraphrased from an analogy offered by one of the participants in this study:  
 730 *The agents are the producers of apples, shoe companies are the ones putting the wrapping on*  
 731 *these apples, and the races are the place where they sell these apples.* The nature of co-  
 732 dependencies is depicted in Figure 2. On the one hand, as we observed before, commercial

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733 stakeholders depend on each other: race directors are in control for the platform in which  
734 athletes can perform and earn money for themselves and for their agents, and where sponsors  
735 leverage investment into athletes' endorsement through the marketing value of the athlete's  
736 appearance and success through exposure and (positive) image transfer. Sponsorship deals  
737 offer the necessary funding for training and provisions for the athlete including shoes and  
738 other apparel items. Using the concept of individual, social and environmental responsibility  
739 for health (Resnik, 2007), one can argue that responsibility for anti-doping code compliance  
740 and clean sport behaviour does not solely reside with the athlete but includes those who  
741 control and influence critical social and environmental factors. On the other hand, all  
742 commercial stakeholders rely on the athlete's performance and personal conducts, but do not  
743 share the risks or personal responsibilities equally. By the WADA Code, athletes bear the  
744 consequences of anti-doping rule violations, let them be intentional infringements on the  
745 clean sport principles or inadvertent rule violation due to lack of anti-doping awareness,  
746 recklessness, or lapse in vigilance. Sponsors and race directors are impacted by a positive  
747 doping test and potential sanctions through tarnished image of the athlete but do not carry  
748 personal responsibility, nor directly affected personally. However, agents with fiduciary  
749 responsibilities are obliged by law to act in the athletes' best interest and carry personal  
750 responsibility to do so. In anti-doping, their responsibility may stretch into areas such as  
751 prevention and education. Juma et al. (2022) showed that in the absence of adequate anti-  
752 doping education in Kenya, athletes tend to rely on coaches and managers as information  
753 sources, which can make athletes vulnerable to exploitation by those with vested commercial  
754 interests in athletes' success.

755         Albeit in another sport, research into the causes of doping within cycling has already  
756 moved beyond the user-perspective, to explore those around the user. Fincouer et al. (2015)  
757 defined three types of cycling team - the converted, the opportunist, and the resistant - based  
758 on how teams responded to doping scandals. The "converted" teams go above and beyond the  
759 expectations of the anti-doping regulations and ensure that any new riders recruited have not  
760 been in any way involved in previous doping activities, publicly demonstrated via signing up  
761 as members of the Movement for Credible Cycling (MPCC, [www.mpcc.fr/](http://www.mpcc.fr/)). The  
762 "opportunist" teams, while formally supportive of anti-doping, take no exceptional measures  
763 to prevent doping. These teams do not directly supply doping products to their riders, but  
764 they accept and tolerate the risk that some riders may engage in doping on an individual



765 basis. Finally, the third type is the “resistant” team, which may still actively support doping  
766 practices, rarely condemn doping, and consistently recruit former dopers.

767 Many parallels can be drawn between these types of cycling teams, and the different  
768 types of agencies described in this study. Several of the agents interviewed described the  
769 lengths they go to, to prevent doping from occurring within their groups and the decisive  
770 actions taken to condemn and eradicate doping when it does occur. Some agents go as far as  
771 committing to paying back the money earned by the athlete for a given period prior to the  
772 positive test. The reason some agents do that is not because they must, but because they want  
773 to signal to the wider sporting community that they condemn their athletes’ actions and want  
774 to fight doping. These agencies are thus very much akin to the “converted” cycling teams.  
775 However, the other type of agency that exists within the professional distance running  
776 community are those who absolve themselves of all responsibility for doping, by denying all  
777 knowledge or culpability. They manage high volumes of athletes and take very little  
778 responsibility for the policing of their own group, seeing that as a job for the anti-doping  
779 authorities. This agency type is analogous to the “opportunist” cycling teams. There was no  
780 evidence in this study of any agencies, races, or sponsors that operated in the way of the  
781 “hesitant” cycling teams, and directly supported doping of athletes. However, the results of  
782 this study provide strong evidence from within the industry that some commercial  
783 stakeholders do not see it as their responsibility to contribute towards making the sport  
784 cleaner.

785 One of the ways in which cycling has made anti-doping the responsibility of all  
786 commercial stakeholders is via the way that their anti-doping programme is funded. In a  
787 system that has been in place for many years, riders, race organisers, and pro teams all  
788 contribute significant amounts of funding to the UCI for its anti-doping programme, with  
789 fixed contributions made by each level of race and team (McKay, 2011). In comparison, prior  
790 to 2020, all funding for the World Athletics anti-doping came from World Athletics itself.  
791 Since then, World Athletics have begun to adopt a more collaborative funding model and  
792 have raised \$2.5 million for out-of-competition testing on distance runners from race  
793 organisers, agents, athletes, and shoe brands (Berkeley, 2020, Gillen, 2019). It remains to be  
794 seen if this shift in funding represents a long overdue move towards collective responsibility  
795 for anti-doping in distance running.

**796 Policy implications, Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

797           The extent to which policy recommendation can be drawn from our study,  
798 being the first ever of its kind, at this point is limited. It is without doubt that anti-doping  
799 should pay attention to the commercial stakeholders, but it is yet to be worked out how this  
800 should manifest in practice. Whilst agents and race directors are not present in every sport,  
801 sponsors and sponsorship deals and endorsement is a financial life support in almost all  
802 sports, and a reward for athletes who make it to the top. However, the latter is also a source of  
803 pressure on athletes which needs to be mitigated or managed. The strict liability rule places  
804 the burden on athletes to adhere to clean sport principles, comply with the anti-doping  
805 requirements and satisfy the sponsors' commercial goals that are directly linked to all three.  
806 Among the commercial stakeholders we shined a light on in this study, agents stand out  
807 because they are the only ones among the three who have fiduciary duty to the athlete. The  
808 regulatory conundrum in sport governing rules around sport agents (Bull & Faure, 2022) and  
809 absence of bespoke anti-doping policies aside, common law requires sport agents to act solely  
810 in the best interest of their clients (Pike Masteralexis, 2020; Nixon, 2015). This puts agents  
811 in the same category as doctors and other healthcare professional where professional duty to  
812 the client/patient can clash with moral or legal obligations (McNamee & Philips, 2011;  
813 Chester et al., 2022). Moving forward, both sport and anti-doping would benefit from clear  
814 policy guidance for agents that sets out their roles and responsibilities for anti-doping.  
815 Furthermore, WADA should consider adding a module for athlete's representatives to the  
816 expanding collection of anti-doping education materials in the ADEL platform.

817           In addition, structural level changes are needed to protect athletes and the sport. One  
818 such need is a better talent identification and development system in talent-rich but resource-  
819 poor countries (e.g., East African countries) to offer a better controlled environment in which  
820 athletes can progress to professional level and make a living from their talent and hard-work  
821 while being protected against commercial exploitation and pressure to dope, at sub-elite as  
822 well as elite levels.

823           Reflections on the state of anti-doping in East African countries are based on a mix of  
824 personal and vicarious experiences. Participants were recruited based on the role they play in  
825 distance running regardless of the profiles of the athletes they represent. By virtue of agreeing  
826 to be interviewed for this research, the participants demonstrated that they are willing to  
827 engage with efforts to understand, and thereby tackle, the issue of doping in professional  
828 distance running, and it was clear that they all had some feeling of duty or stewardship  
829 towards the sport. The group that was not represented within this study are the commercial

830 stakeholders who take no responsibility for addressing doping. Therefore, a limitation of this  
 831 study is that it does not provide the first-hand views of commercial stakeholders who do not  
 832 see anti-doping as part of their role, and therefore the study relies on their colleagues to  
 833 represent their views, second-hand. Participants from the former group were invited to  
 834 participate and some did show initial interest in the study and offer some off-the-record  
 835 contributions, but ultimately declined to take part in the study.

836 A further limitation of the study is that all participants were male. Although this was  
 837 not by design, it reflects the demographics within the industry, as most commercial  
 838 stakeholders in professional distance running are male. Nonetheless, female agents, sponsors  
 839 marketing managers, and race directors do exist, and thus future studies with female  
 840 commercial stakeholders will make an important contribution to the field.

841 The present study opened new research avenues beyond addressing gender  
 842 representation and differences among commercial stakeholders. Future research should also  
 843 focus on why certain stakeholders see the need for collective responsibility while others do  
 844 not and should explore the mechanisms that could be put in place to encourage collective  
 845 responsibility among all stakeholders. An alternative means of exploring a ‘higher risk’  
 846 environment would be to consider the views of those directly impacted and interview athletes  
 847 about their relationship with commercial stakeholders, including those who have worked  
 848 under unscrupulous commercial stakeholders who de-emphasise clean sport as well as those  
 849 who are committed to clean sport to gain a sense of the influence they have.

850 Lastly, the study was set out to be exploratory and offer the first ever empirical  
 851 findings from this group to move toward to adapting or formulating a theory that  
 852 conceptualizes the role, the influence and the responsibilities of this special group of  
 853 commercial stakeholders in anti-doping. Whilst McLeroy’s socio-economic approach (1988)  
 854 is a useful model to position this study in the athlete environment, it is too broad and general,  
 855 and thus lacks finesse, to capture the managed balance between good athletic performance  
 856 and how this is achieved (i.e., with or without prohibited substances or methods), and the  
 857 unique dynamics between the stakeholders. Segments of the findings resonate with existing  
 858 theories, such as the tripartite individual-social-environmental responsibility for health  
 859 (Resnik, 2007) and talent-development models in sport (De Bosscher & De Rycke, 2017; De  
 860 Bosscher et al., 2009; 2010; Güllich & Cobley, 2017; Truyens et al., 2014), and informs  
 861 models of sponsors’ decision about athlete endorsement (Roberts & Burton, 2018). Yet, no  
 862 single theory was able to fully capture the complex interactions between co-dependencies of  
 863 agents, race directors, sponsor representatives, and their collective dependencies on the

864 athletes' performances, including the commercially valuable attributes of sporting success  
865 such as 'clean', 'exciting' and 'inspiring'.

866

### 867 **Conclusion**

868 Reflecting on the sector rather than the sample, the results highlighted that - despite  
869 the importance of clean sport for the commercial value, and deep-run interdependencies in  
870 benefits from good athletic performance and consequences from doping - not all commercial  
871 stakeholders take responsibility for anti-doping. For the long-term professional viability of  
872 distance running, shared responsibility for clean sport is needed. On the one hand, structural  
873 changes at both local and global level are required to effectively tackle doping in distance  
874 running. On the other hand, fostering the relationship between all parties is critical, and it is  
875 hoped that this paper will bring together the views from the commercial side, and promote  
876 introspection and action from the governing bodies.

877

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880

### 881 **Data Availability**

882 The anonymised transcripts are not publicly available and are only accessible to the authors  
883 due to the high-profile nature of the participants.

884

### 885 **CRedit Author Statement**

886 **Jake Shelley:** Conceptualization, Investigation, Formal analysis, Writing - Original Draft  
887 Project administration; **Sam Thrower:** Methodology, Writing - Review & Editing, Data  
888 Curation, Supervision; **Andrea Petróczi:** Conceptualization, Writing - Original Draft,  
889 Writing - Review & Editing, Supervision

890

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## COMMERCIAL STAKEHOLDERS AND ANTI-DOPING

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1187 **Figure legends:**

1188 Figure 1. Socio-ecological system view of stakeholders with direct commercial (agents, race  
1189 organisers and sponsors) and indirect financial (local governing bodies e.g., sport federations)  
1190 interests in anti-doping

1191 Figure 2. Co-dependency and consequences of doping on commercial stakeholders

1192