



The Olympic Games in Sydney were not only notable for sporting achievement. More drug tests were carried out than ever before, resulting in an unprecedented number of athletes withdrawing from the competition before it even began. For the first time, a test was introduced that could directly detect the presence of EPO through a combination blood / urine sample. However, the test was only able to detect traces of the drug taken between three and four days before the sample was taken. Typically, a competitor using EPO will stop using the substance weeks before any major competition. A total of 300 EPO tests were carried out in Sydney - and none proved positive. In addition, the Sydney Olympics did not test for human growth hormone, which is being increasingly used by athletes to gain an unfair advantage.

Leading the way - or following the trend?

What is the current state of play in the fight against doping?
Two experts linked to the IOC had a tough time convincing
Play the Game that the battle is being won

By Kasper Lindberg

»The Sydney Olympics represented a significant turning point in the fight for fair and equitable competition. Drug cheats are now finding fewer and fewer places to hide.« This was John Mendoza's message to Play the Game. The acting Chief Executive Officer of the Australian Sports Drug Agency backed up his claims by listing an impressive array of anti-doping initiatives taken by the organisers of the Sydney Olympics. Later, speaking on the same theme, IOC Medical Director Patrick Schamasch underlined the message, claiming: »The IOC is - and has been, over the last 30 years - leading the way in the fight against doping.« The two speakers backed up their claims with plenty of statistics relating to the number of tests and positive results in Sydney. However, many of the assembled journalists remained sceptical.

John Mendoza pointed to a number of milestones he claimed were reached in Sydney. A record number of tests -

2043 - were carried out on competitors. Many of these tests were unannounced, and took place before the games got underway. An EPO test was used for the first time. The test results were accessible to all, and independent observers were invited to view the whole process. Speaking shortly after John Mendoza, Patrick Schamasch told the conference how the IOC persuaded a record number of laboratories across the world to carry out doping tests before the games commenced, and that most samples were taken out of competition.

Ping pong without a winner

No one could deny that positive developments in the fight against doping are always welcome. However, some delegates expressed the opinion that Mendoza and Schamasch had understated the size of the problem. The achievements of Sydney, claimed one sceptic, should be taken in the context of the continued worldwide rise in doping use and the constant development of masking agents that are ma-

Patrick Schamasch (above) and John Mendoza (below) claim that doping cheats are facing tough times ahead

king illegal substances increasingly difficult to detect.

This cynicism was echoed in the following debate. Both Mendoza and Schamasch admitted that the battle is still a long way from being won, but both were of the opinion that the "powers of good" now have the upper hand. However, some delegates questioned whether it is possible to talk about a turning point when no reliable test for EPO or growth hormone has yet been developed - and when other substances are being developed that few are yet aware of.

The debate began to resemble a game of ping-pong, with both Mendoza and Schamasch reiterating the positive message while journalists queued up to question the validity of their arguments. John Mendoza's final contribution was, for many, the most telling. »I believe that the gathering of information is our best chance of solving this problem,« he said. »If we are to stamp out doping, we need to make a strong investment over the next 10-20 years.« ♦

