

Passport to remove suspicion

Sweden's latest weapon in the fight against doping is a 'blood passport'

By Karen Balling Radmer



Gathering information

Bengt Skött, studio host and reporter with Sweden's national broadcaster Sveriges Radio, found much to occupy his mind at Play the game. Currently working on an investigation related to doping, he found the many aspects of this subject detailed at the conference provided him with valuable information. In addition, he says, Play the game was an excellent opportunity to acquire sources and gain fresh knowledge in other areas.

»I have also obtained good ideas for many other stories' he says. »For example, I'd like to do something about women in Swedish sport. Another contribution, on violence in Canadian junior hockey, made a big impression on me. I think it did on all of us.«

»There are interesting presentations going on from morning till night,« he continues. »The conference is so intense; it can be difficult to keep your concentration for five days in a row. Anything more and it would be too long.«

Among other areas, Bengt Skött covers athletics, long-distance skiing, horse trotting and Olympic politics for the radio. He participated in the conference partly for education, and partly as an element of his investigative journalism work.

Olympic drug testing methods are not working. Political considerations mean that not enough athletes are being tested. And moreover, according to members of the Swedish Olympic Committee, it is still too easy to cheat the system.

As a result of these concerns, and in an attempt to prevent athletes manipulating blood samples, the Committee has introduced a new system known as a 'blood passport'. Bo Berglund, Chief Physician with the Swedish Olympic Committee, provides details of the scheme to the Play the game conference.

He begins by explaining why his committee believes that such documentation is necessary. While a sizeable staff of medical professors are doing their utmost to discover new ways of detecting this dangerous practice, he says, an increasing number are plying their trade on the other side of the moral divide – doing their best to find new ways of beating test methods.

In brief, blood doping involves increasing the amount of haemoglobin in the blood, which improves its ability to carry oxygen to the muscles. When EPO is used, 'baby' blood cells or artificial oxygen cells carry blood round the body, improving performance to such an extent that athletes are seemingly willing to risk their lives. And that, says Bo Berglund, is exactly what they are doing. Those who experiment with blood doping know how to begin a manipulation of their blood, but few know how to halt the process. Such a practice can end in death.

Although this method of doping has existed for a number of years, the Swedish 'blood passport' was only introduced after the Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City. There, Berglund was not alone in suspecting that blood-doped athletes managed to beat the system.

»The Olympic testing system uncovered three blood-doped athletes. Is that because there were only three? Or did some slip through the net?« he asks.

Berglund points out how easy it can be to cheat the Olympic testing system by detailing a variety of different methods. Athletes can arrive late, thus avoiding earlier rounds of testing, he says. They can simply hide. And they can also manipulate their haemoglobin count. A blood count can be kept artificially low before a test by first exercising and then sleep. The same effect can be achieved by consuming liquids an hour before a test. Athletes can also reduce their haemoglobin count by simply lying on the floor with their feet up against the wall.

Did some slip through the net in Salt Lake City? Peter Berglund asked



»I asked our athletes if they saw anyone lying on their backs in such a position before a test round at the Winter Olympics,« he continues. »They answered 'yes'. This demonstrates that athletes are fully aware of this method.«

Berglund has another reason to doubt the effectiveness of the test procedures in Salt Lake City. According to his information, the testing capacity of the laboratories was not fully utilised – due, he believes, to a conscious political decision. At the same time, no checks were made for new types of artificial oxygen cells, despite the fact that two types of these cells were already available on the market.

According to an independent observation report from the World Anti Doping Agency (WADA) on the test system at the Winter Olympics, a large number of blood samples were destroyed, and problems were also found to exist with the paperwork detailing the tests.

»After Salt Lake City we told ourselves that something must be done,« he continues. »This is why we introduced the blood passport. Our aim is to trace any manipulation of the blood, and at the same time protect the health of the athletes.«

He points out that Swedish athletes, many of whom are tired of the suspicions that seem to accompany every medal they win, generally support the system. Although it is expensive – it necessitates athletes being tested both in and out of competition throughout the year – the test's supporters claim it could pave the way for new standards in international competition, and, at the same time, save lives. Blood doping is a risky business.

Around eighty Swedish athletes are currently involved in the blood passport system. If more are to take part, greater resources will be needed. However, Bo Berglund believes that the adoption of the blood passport scheme will help create a much better Olympic testing system.