

Drama over Donati's ongoing problems with the Italian Olympic Committee raised expectations ahead of his address

Last-minute licence to speak

The fight to bring Sandro Donati to Denmark left a lasting impression on "Play the Game"

By Kasper Lindberg

A clearly audible murmur passed through the main auditorium when the "Play the Game" conference was told that Sandro Donati would not be attending. During the preceding three weeks, Donati had in vain sought permission to travel from his employers, the Italian Olympic Committee (CONI).

Although CONI gave no official reason for their stance, those aware of Donati's background were in little doubt that the committee's intention was to gag their own Head of Research. Could CONI's reluctance to allow Donati to travel be due to fears he would expose the committee's own unhappy role in Italian doping over the past 20 years? Many believed so, and in the end they

were proved correct. For many years, the 53-year-old Donati has been a vociferous critic of what he sees as CONI's failure to address doping problems, and this was reflected in his address.

And as it turned out, the little Italian came to epitomise the conference's primary message of democracy and openness in sport.

Pressure on CONI

Immediately after news of the ban was received, those with any influence agreed to exert pressure on CONI in an attempt to get the committee to reverse its decision. What would it look like if the Italian Olympic Committee were seen to be gagging its own Head of Research, they argued. Could CONI offer a sensible reason

for banning Donati from a conference he had signed up for months ago?

On Monday Morning the organisers of Play the Game sent a fax to CONI's General Secretary Dr Raffaele Pagnozzi asking these very questions. And while the conference's scheduled programme continued as usual, Donati's case was the major talking point in the corridors. Would he dare travel without permission? Had CONI answered the fax?

But Dr Pagnozzi did not react to the questions until the fax was followed up by a telephone call. By then it was impossible for Donati to make his scheduled address on Tuesday morning. However, on that same evening some good news arrived. Donati was to be allowed to travel to Copenhagen - not as a CONI representative, but as a private individual. CONI defended its original position by alleging that Donati had not sought official permission to attend the conference - a claim that correspondence between CONI and Donati later confirmed to be false.

In the early hours of Wednesday morning, CONI's Head of Research finally boarded the plane to Copenhagen, ready to step forward in front of the conference the next morning as a private individual - but an individual but with a compelling story about doping and corruption. Play the Game had won an important victory central to its message of openness and democracy in sport. ♦



The little man versus the establishment

After 19 years fighting against doping and corruption, Sandro Donati is now set to retire from the limelight

By Kasper Lindberg

In 1981, Sandro Donati was offered the job of coaching Italy's middle-distance running team. It was in this capacity that he first met Professor Conconi of the University of Ferrara, and began to first learn about the illegal use of drugs in Italian athletics. Seeing him as part of the established order, the professor told Donati about his experiments with blood doping in Italian athletics. Donati was amazed to hear of such a programme, which apparently had the full support of the Italian Athletics Association. He immediately expressed his strong opposition to such a method of achieving success.

Donati was forced to work under constant pressure from the association, which was keen for him to allow his runners to take part in the doping programme. It seemed that many of Italy's international runners were already taking part, and Donati constantly found his objections suppressed.

In 1985, through his parliamentary contacts, Donati succeeded in helping bring about a change in the law, which effectively banned the practise of blood doping. In 1986 he discovered a list showing that systematic doping using testosterone and anabolic steroids was still widespread in Italian athletics. Then, in 1987, he passed on his story to the newspapers.

The false jump

During the 1987 World Athletics Championships in Rome, Donati became aware that doping was not the only method of cheating. He got wind of a rumour that the long jump competition would be fixed in favour of the home fans' favourite, Giovanni Evangelisti. The rumour proved to be correct. Before Evangelisti's final jump, TV pictures (later viewed at Play the Game) show a judge measuring out an electronic "marker" to a length of 8.38 metres. Evangelisti's final jump is disappointing, certainly well under eight metres. However,

with public attention focused on events at the other end of the stadium, the Italian is awarded a distance of 8.38 - enough to take the bronze medal. Even the athlete cannot believe his 'luck'.

Donati's attempts to expose the cheating did not make him popular with CONI. Shortly afterwards, he was fired from his job as coach. Donati then decided to lay low and concentrate on writing a book. The result, "Champions without Value" was initially a big success in his native Italy. However, it inexplicably disappeared from the bookshelves after just a few weeks, with demand far exceeding supply for months later.

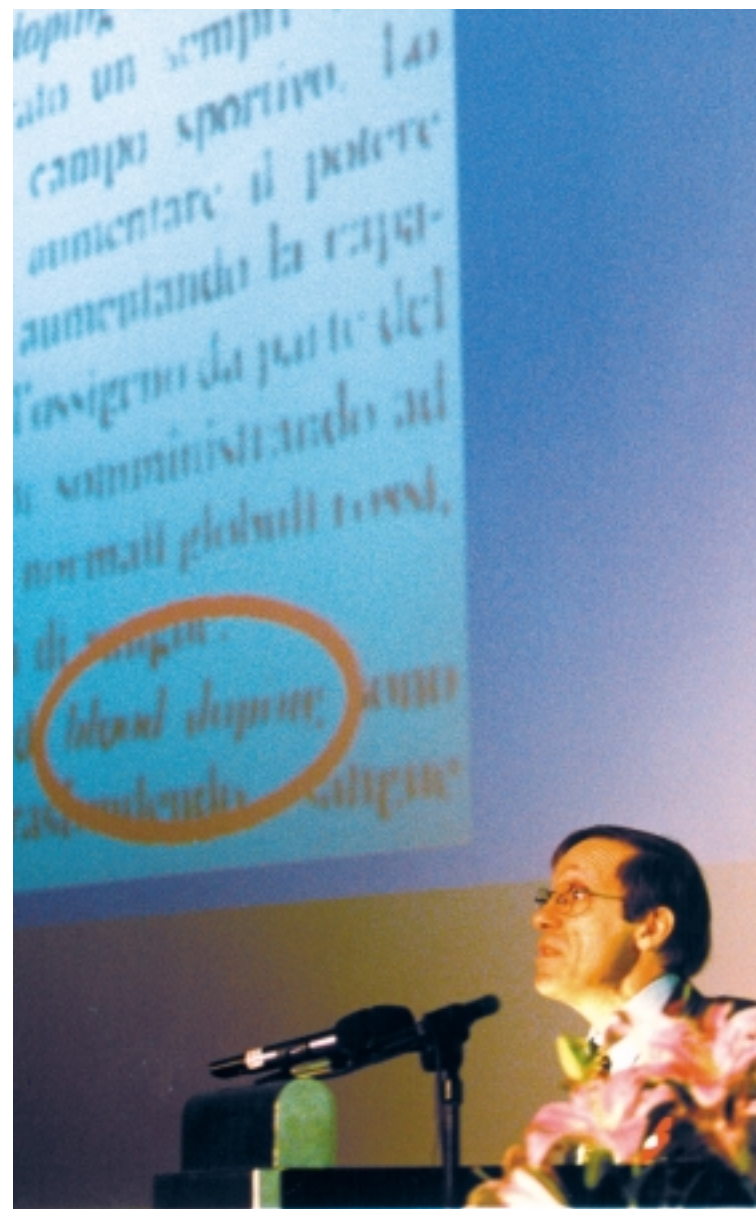
Becoming aware of EPO

In 1992, Donati was back in favour with CONI. Warming to the presence of their former coach, the Italian Olympic Committee offered him the job of Head of Research. Donati accepted the job, seeing an official position as an ideal launchpad to continue his fight against doping.

He was also offered a seat on the influential Italian Anti-Doping Committee together with - among others - Professor Conconi. Again he accepted, but he soon found many committee members held opinions contrary to his own. He was dealt an early setback when his suggestion to dope-test the Italian cycling star Francesco Moser - an "assistant" to Professor Conconi - was voted down.

However, Donati found plenty of other work to do. He had noticed, for example, that CONI's laboratory in Rome was posting a suspiciously low number of positive dope tests, and he felt this phenomenon should be investigated further.

It was around this time that a new illegal substance was making its presence felt in endurance sport - Erythropoietin, or EPO. Donati's investigations brought to light important new information concerning the substance. Since it was impossible to detect by a urine sample, EPO abuse was becoming more and



Most controversial among Donati's findings have been the widespread distribution of EPO from the University of Ferrara

more commonplace in professional cycling. And according to Donati, the trail led right back to the heart of Italian athletics. While officially researching tests to detect EPO, Donati relates that Professor Conconi was unofficially administering the substance to many of Italy's elite riders.

In 1994, Donati penned a report containing his findings. After it was delivered to CONI's president Mario Pescante, he received no response and the revelations were buried for the next two years.

Finally, in 1996, the case began to gather momentum. The Italian Sports newspaper La Gazzetta Dello Sport published a number of articles on doping



and made contact with Donati. After he spoke of the report's existence, journalists began to question Pescante on why CONI had let the report stand unchallenged and unreleased for two years.

By 1997 CONI's relationship with its Head of Research was at an all-time low. It was around this time that Donati believes an attempt was made to set him up. A young female runner who he had been coaching tested positive for an unnaturally high caffeine count - equivalent to 30 cups of coffee. Although an independent investigation found the test flawed and secured Donati's reputation, he realised that he had almost become the victim of a plot to discredit him

In 1998 rumours grew about the widespread use of doping in Italian football and attention became focused on the doping laboratory in Rome of which Donati had previously voiced his suspicions. It turned out that they were correct. The laboratory's tests were found to be unquestionably lacking - they were unable to detect the presence of anabolic steroids and other hormones. The scandal culminated in the resignation of CONI's president and prompted a number of public investigations into the activities of, among others, Professor Conconi. These investigations are still continuing today.

Withdrawing from the spotlight

For over an hour, Sandro Donati fascinated the packed assembly as he recounted his experiences. After he finished his address, he received the conference's first standing ovation.

The 53-year-old Italian's long and tireless fight against doping is highly respected, and the extra effort that was needed to bring him to Denmark certainly brought its rewards. But the man who is portrayed by many in the sporting world as a hero is now tired of working within a system that has impeded his fight for a cleaner sport right from the start.

"I am tired of the world of sport" he stated after his speech, and hinted that he is set to leave his position at CONI and concentrate on education and doping prevention amongst children.

Even though Donati feels that he has fought in vain against greater powers, his story is proving a real inspiration to others in the fight against drugs and corruption in sport. ♦



Gene doping is the next step

By Kasper Lindberg

Forget GM foods - it's time to address the challenge of gene doping, says Bengt Saltin

Artificial improvements to the body's genetic makeup are already a reality, and it is only a question of time before this method is used in competitive sport. This is the prediction of Bengt Saltin, respected anti-doping campaigner and Chairman of Anti-Doping Denmark.

The 65-year-old Swedish sports physiologist is in no doubt. Gene doping is highly effective, it will be available soon, and cannot be ignored by those involved in the fight against doping.

In reality, he says, it is impossible to know exactly when elite sportsmen and women will start injecting gene-altering material directly into their muscles - material that can, for example, allow muscles to grow, or produce the hormone erythropoietin (EPO). When gene doping is ready for use, sportsmen and women will no longer need to dope themselves with artificial hormones. This new method of doping will allow these hormones to be produced by their own body.

However, research into gene doping has already shown frightening side effects. Laboratory mice doubled their body weight in a single month after being introduced to growth hormones. And in less than six months, Monkeys were recorded with a red blood count of 75-89 against normal rates of 40 or lower. These results have convinced Bengt Saltin that for those who wish to break the rules, much can be gained from gene doping. Any alteration to the genetic make up of the body is permanent, and side effects in humans could include a thickening

of the blood, which may lead to clots or severe heart problems. But despite the dangers, he is convinced that there will be no shortage of people willing to experiment.

In his address to Play the Game, Bengt Saltin pointed out that the main problem with gene doping is the fact that it is almost impossible to detect. When asked whether it may be possible to develop a test to identify this form of doping he replied: »I have to say that I am very pessimistic. The artificial DNA that is added to the muscle is only found locally. And the materials that this DNA allows the muscle to produce are identical to materials produced naturally by the body.«

Gene doping will not be detectable through urine or blood samples, he added. The only possible method of detection would be through an actual sample of muscle fibre. This would require a large, painful insertion with a broad needle and would not be a popular - or practical - test.

Bengt Saltin's opinion is clear: »Biological variation is fundamental to sport. You could say it is what gives a person their talent. This can now be affected with genes, and this must be wrong.«

»Doping occurs because there are people out there with the knowledge and the will to make use of it,« he continues. "As long as this is the case, it will continue. You cannot take doping out of life. This will only happen when enough people turn around and simply say: "enough is enough. We do not want this.« ♦

