Doping – not just for the professionals

Large quantities of illegal sports drugs are regularly smuggled for sale among amateur athletes. Some are even destined to fall into the hands of children.

By Karen Balling Radmer

Forget the top athletes. They are, and always will be, heavily involved with sponsors, many of whom are directly responsible for the production of illegal drugs. Instead, the focus should be firmly fixed on saving children and young athletes from being introduced to the many varieties of hormones and steroids available on sport’s black market.

So sounds the message from Sandro Donati, the head of research in the CONI, Italy’s Olympic Committee. Along with Swedish Chief Detective Inspector Gunnar Hermansson, he detailed a network of hormone smuggling gangs with connections stretching from Italy to Russia and from Korea to South America.

«Year after year,» Donati says, «police confiscates a growing amount of illegal performance enhancers, – especially anabolic steroids destined for sale on the black market.»

Customers are numerous, and include young athletes, members of fitness clubs and schoolchildren. Even in a country such as Sweden, where the law forbids all forms of doping, many children know exactly where to get hold of hormones and other banned substances.

«It is possible to buy these kind of pharmaceuticals without prescription in most countries in Asia, Africa and South America,» points out Gunnar Hermansson.

«Even in Europe, some Mediterranean countries permit pharmacists to sell bulk quantities of anabolic steroids and testosterone products directly to private individuals with no questions asked. This illegal trade is global, extensive and lucrative. However, unlike the smuggling of narcotics, very few countries interfere in this illegal drugs trade.»

«The smuggling of anabolic steroids and testosterone derivatives is extensive, and has been on the increase over the last two or three years,» he continues.

«Most of the hormone products on the European black market come from the EU or from East European countries like Russia, Poland, Bulgaria and Romania. Another popular source is Thailand.»

Despite tougher regulations of the legal sale of hormones, Gunnar Hermansson explains that illegal alternatives continue to appear on the black market in large quantities. This, he claims, can only be due to the fact that manufacturers are willingly over-producing for the black market.

Unlike steroids, he says, the trade in illegal growth hormones has not yet made much impact on the market. This is due to the fact that their manufacture is strictly regulated. However, Hermansson adds that criminals provide their own answer to this regulation – in the form of armed robberies.

«The illegal doping trade is increasing, and the supply from legal and illegal manufacturers seems to be unlimited,» he asserts.

Shocking information

For 20 years Sandro Donati has fought against doping and until now mainly focused on elite sport. However, during recent years he has come to realise that despite numerous disclosures and high-profile prosecutions, doping is still on the increase. This is not only the case amongst professionals, but among amateurs and young athletes too. Presenting his findings to an audience of shocked journalists and researchers, Donati says:

«The amateur doping presents a serious health risk. Top athletes have doctors to help them control the dangerous side effects of doping, but amateurs do not.»

In cooperation with the Italian legal authorities, Sandro Donati has recently been involved in a large-scale investigation into hormone smuggling, spanning many different countries across the world.

The prosecutor in Bologna alone finally closed the case after a total of 41 people had been arrested and a huge amount of illegal substances confiscated.

The investigation involved listening in on telephone conversations, which in turn led to the breaking-up of a large dealers’ network concerned with the supply of substances to fitness centres.

Sad conversations

The phone conservations tell a saddening story (see box):

«Hundreds of thousands of amateur athletes are involved,» says Donati. «Every day there are countless tragedies.»

For Sandro Donati, the recordings prove that neither the dealer nor the buyer has much idea of what they are doing, meaning an overdose of steroids or hormones is a real possibility.

Other recordings contain examples of traffickers ordering large quantities of drugs for their athletes, or grim examples in which the dealers have no idea that the drugs they are peddling can kill. During the investigation, six bodybuilders were known to have died.
A total of 119 fitness centres were involved in the Bologna investigation and illegal drugs with a market value of well over five million Euros were seized.

In all, 301 different substances were involved. The case uncovered a network comprising of 287 dealers, including athletics coaches and doormen at discotheques, encompassing 15 countries including Australia, the USA, Germany, Russia and Spain.

The largest quantity of such drugs ever discovered by police was confiscated in Belgium in July 2002. A total of 550 kilos of illegal anabolic steroids were seized – drugs intended to be distributed in six different nations.

New models for sport
As part of a wide-ranging solution, Sandro Donati proposes that new physical activity models should be designed for children and young people, supervised by specially trained personnel.

Not least, he adds that the media should consider shifting its focus by concentrating less on results and elite athletes. At the same time, he points out that information campaigns can play a big part by warning of the dangers of doping.

Dietary supplements are regarded as being a safe and legal alternative to doping. However, if you believe that, it’s time to think again. You’re making a big mistake,” says Christiane Ayotte, a Canadian researcher, professor and doping expert. “And you are not alone. Millions of people across the world use dietary supplements every day.”

To highlight the problem she refers to a recent investigation of 634 different products from 15 nations, which found that 289 contained undeclared substances not declared on the packet. Of these, for example, 34 contained testosterone. However, despite the dangers, most countries have little in the way of legislation forbidding the sale of these products.

“None of these supplements were deemed illegal,” she continues. “As long as no more than ten percent of a given substance is contained in the supplement, producers are not legally obliged to list it on the packet.”

She adds: “You don’t need a prescription to purchase dietary supplements, and you choose your own dosage – that is a dangerous combination.

As a medical requirement, Christiane Ayotte points out that dietary supplements are often simply not necessary. Sportsmen and women maybe have need for extra vitamin C, iron and calcium – but that is all. Despite this, the market for such supplements is enormous. In the USA alone, such products were responsible for a turnover of 31 billion dollars in 1999. A quick search on the Internet shows reveals countless examples of protein powders, vitamins and minerals for sale online. Even in the supermarket, dietary supplements are freely on sale side-by-side with other foodstuffs.

“It is important that consumers demand to see documentation,” Christiane Ayotte continues. “They should insist that governments recognise the importance of regulations and controls. If, after using dietary supplements, you are found guilty of doping, you can try to claim you didn’t know what you were doing – but that will not alter the fact that you are accountable.”