ATHLETES UNDER CONSTANT SUSPICION

How do athletes feel about being the objects of worldwide control and suspicion? Kelli White and Joachim B. Olsen talked about the loss of personal rights

by Eva Marie Andersen

“...we give up a lot of our rights being athletes and we know this.”

On the opening day of Play the Game, Kelli White, former World Champion in sprint, took the stand to explain why she had decided to use drugs to enhance her performance. In addition to being an apology, her story was also about the pressures faced by top athletes including the constant suspicion that they cheat.

Adding to the picture drawn by White was the Danish short put champion and Olympic bronze medallist, Joachim B. Olsen, who spoke later in the week about the realities of being an athlete under constant surveillance and together the two testimonials were striking because the doping issue is seldom seen through the eyes of athletes.

The worst mistake

Ranking in the top-ten of the world, Kelli White already had an impressive record. However, an inconsistent track season in 2002 combined with the pressures of the people she trusted with her training and career, had led her to subject herself to a full doping programme to reach the top. White characterizes doping as “the worst mistake I could have ever made” and takes full responsibility for her actions. It is notable, however, that it was her trainer Korchemny who introduced her to doping distributor Victor Conte.

Victor Conte is the founder of the Bay Area Laboratory Co-operative and he provided White with what she originally thought was flaxseed oil, a legal supplement, in order to help her recover from injuries. She was later informed that she had been given illegal drugs.

White later went back to Victor Conte with the intent to be supplied with more illegal sub-
“It was an incredibly inspiring conference with a good and intense atmosphere.”
Alice Riis Bach, author, Denmark

stances and she takes full responsibility for her actions of implementing a full doping programme in 2003.

Abuse of trust
“[I] want to explain what it takes for the whole system to work,” W hit e said. “It not only took Con- te’s help, it took my coach making me believe that what I was doing was okay. A lot of the time what happens to athletes is that people make you believe that what you’re doing is okay because everyone else is doing it. That’s definitely not the truth, because I have friends who compete now who are clean, and it takes away from their achievements when you are made to believe that everyone is doing the same thing.”

W hile working with Conte, W ite confirms that she was able to pass seventeen drug tests, both in and out of competition. She described her prior relationships with Korchery and Conte as being based on trust.

“I never would have believed that Victor would have hurt me in any kind of way,” she said. “But now I can see the lies and the health of the athlete was compromised.”

Kelli Whtie also spoke about the horror of seeing her body change so drastically over a short period of time. “I gained 20 pounds in four weeks, I was humongous”, she said and looked a bit lone- ly when remembering feeling ashamed and cover- ing up her body so her family could not see it.

Clean athletes pay too
An athlete such as Kelli Whtie will always be haunted by doping and by the Balco affair. N evertheless, also athletes who were never involved in doping affairs pay a price. Due to what he refers to as “the battle against the media”, individuals like Joachim O lsen, leading international short putter, are also haunted by the doping issue.

“Especially older journalists have a very fixed idea that it is not possible to perform record re- sults without drugs”, Joachim O lsen believes. O lsen says that to a certain extent he remains uncon- cerned that some competitors take stimulants as he does not think it gives them much of an ad- vantage.

He is, however, very concerned about his image, stressing that as an athlete, he is extremely dependent on image for the obvious reason that sponsors cannot afford to risk investing in an ath- letes associated with doping. “Sponsors always ask about the drug issue: Is that going to be an issue with you?”

How does an athlete prove his or her inno- cence? According to broad-shouldered O lsen, it is impossible for top athletes to prove their inno- cence when they are met with indirect and direct suspicion and disbelief.

His generation of athletes is suffering from the legacy of doping in the 1970’s. “If I had been an athlete in the 1970’s or in the 1980’s, I probably would have been on drugs too. I am not a better person than they were, but the morals were dif- ferent,” O lsen said.

“I got my sports education in the 1990’s where morals have changed. Morals are not a con- sistent thing”. Give athletes something back
A part of daily life as a top-competitor is living with day- to-day surveillance. O lsen spoke of the so-called “whereabouts” forms in which athletes indicate where they can be reached at any time in the following three months for unannounced drug tests.

Acknowledging the necessity of out-of-com- petition testing, O lsen talked about the problems with whereabouts forms. “It is a bit stressful”, he says explaining that “it is impossible for anybody to say where exactly they are going to be three months in advance, every single day”.

As an example, he explained that when filling in his own form three months ago, he could not have foreseen that he would be speaking at Play the Game’s conference. This, he elaborated, makes the content of the whereabouts forms inaccurate.

When journalists from the floor confronted him with the fact that some athletes fill out forms incorrectly, claiming to be in one place while in fact being at another location, O lsen gave his per- sonal guarantee that from his experience in Den- mark, it would not be possible to lie about where- abouts and particularly not without the knowledge of the federation to which the athlete belongs.

W ith the air of a man who seeks to create dialogue and understanding, he spoke for himself and on behalf of his fellow athletes when he called for the need for surveillance organisations to give something back to athletes.

“I would like that surveillance organisations did more to provide help for protection of per- sonal image for clean athletes against the constant suspicion from the media concerning elite athletics”.

Doped rivals is not the prime worry for short putter Joachim B. Olsen, but the harm that suspicion does to his image.