During the 2007 Tour de France, the whereabouts system for cyclists was laid out before the world’s eyes. Everywhere people discussed whether Danish rider Michael Rasmussen, the tour leader at the time, had been in Mexico or Italy in the run-up to the tour. A leading anti-doping researcher now suggests implanting a GPS chip into athletes to resolve the question of whereabouts once and for all.

The whereabouts system requires athletes to inform anti-doping authorities where they are at any given time so they can be tested in the training periods between competitions. However, for a whereabouts system to be an effective weapon in the anti-doping arsenal, the Australian anti-doping researcher Michael Ashenden believes that testers need to know exactly where athletes are at every second of the day. He proposes the introduction of a NOLO system (notification and location) based on a GPS chip implanted into athletes. The chip would enable testing agencies to track athletes wherever they are and test them at times of the agency’s choosing.

According to Ashenden, the problem is that current testing methods are not always able to detect doping agents in the days, even hours, after their introduction to the body. Athletes can sometimes pass under the radar even though they have been tested and their whereabouts known.

Therefore, testers need to be able to get to athletes at times of the testers’ choosing, not specific testing windows, as athletes may be able to use masking agents to hide the effects of doping in the hours prior to the window.

**The athlete’s sacrifice**

The system has obvious implications for the privacy of athletes, a point that Ashenden himself acknowledges. However, he argues that the burden would be justified given the lifestyle benefits of being an athlete and the need to protect the integrity of sport.

“These measures unquestionably involve a significant sacrifice by the athlete,” Ashenden said at the Play the Game conference.

“But sacrifice used to be one of things we regarded as a virtue in our athletes and our role models. Perhaps today’s athlete in return for the opportunity to reap personal fame and fortune beyond the reach of the normal person must in return be willing to sacrifice some of the rights and the privileges that the ordinary citizen enjoys.”

But are athletes prepared to subject themselves to constant monitoring by GPS?

In Norway, journalist and sports researcher Dag Vidar Hanstad has carried out research into Norway’s whereabouts system that requires athletes to supply testing authorities with personal details, such as contact telephone numbers, training times and venues, and travel plans.

As part of his research, Hanstad has made surveys amongst athletes about their feelings towards the system.

A majority of the athletes felt that the system did not significantly deflect from the joy of being a professional athlete. However, in terms of personal freedom, a slight majority felt that in some way, the whereabouts system was akin to a big brother society, with nearly a quarter fully agreeing with that assessment.

However, Hanstad argues that given that in general, the sporting community has accepted the need for an anti-doping movement in sports, the whereabouts system in Norway can be justified as it is a logical extension of anti-doping testing. But, to maintain its justification, costs must not be placed upon athletes and the system must be properly managed and effective.

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**AN EYE IN THE SKY ON ALL ATHLETES**

GPS implants in athletes could improve anti-doping testing

by Michael Herborn

In the fall of 2007, the whereabouts system for cyclists was laid out before the world’s eyes. Everywhere people discussed whether Danish cyclist Michael Rasmussen, the tour leader at the time, had been in Mexico or Italy in the run-up to the Tour de France. A leading anti-doping researcher now suggests implanting a GPS chip into athletes to resolve the question of where they were once and for all.

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