Scrap world records based on doping

by Kirsten Sparre

For the sake of children, scrap all world records that are based on the use of doping. That is the new and controversial suggestion from Sandro Donati.

In Donati’s view, accepting world records set by doping users is yet another example of corrupting influence on children and young people from a sports system based on business values. It is time to humanise the system through a careful examination of current world records in individual sports such as athletics, swimming and weightlifting.

“Special commissions of experts should be appointed to examine the list of record holders, study their historical context, their national backgrounds and then cancel all suspicious records which is probably all of them,” says Donati.

Eliminating records based on doping will be a tribute to truth but also a question of opening up a sports system to younger athletes where they can get good results without the use of drugs.

“The IOC and international sports federations are not for people, they are against people. They use people because these kinds of records are not human. They know very well that behind these records there is sophisticated doping not only for the record holder but also for number two, three, four and five in the ranking,” Donati says.

Such a system leaves only one road open to young athletes: to increase the use of doping to live up to the expectations of business driven sports organisations.

“We cannot say to children that this is the future of sport. We must hand down to younger athletes sports that are truly practicable, and that is infinitely more important than protecting the image of record men and women and the organisations behind them,” Donati believes.

“Everything is interesting.”
Bertil Valderhaug, Aftenposten, Norway.

According to pedagogy professor Richard Bailey, child athletes should be treated more like children instead of being stretched beyond their physical capabilities. Photo: Scanpix/Reuters

Sport breaches UN Convention on CHILDREN’S RIGHTS

by Michael Herborn

According to pedagogy professor Richard Bailey from Roehampton University, child athletes need to be treated more like children and less like athletes if sport is to be good for them. From the world of elite sport, however, there are countless examples of children being stretched beyond their physical capabilities, used solely for their sporting talents, even to the expense of their education.

In the West, we might assume that examples of this are limited to developing nations or nations with lower general respect for human rights thresholds. However, this is not the case. From his research, Bailey has found evidence of sports breaching 19 articles in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, including the right to protection from sexual exploitation and abuse, the right to education and the right to freedom of expression.

Included among them was Article 31, the right to leisure, play, and participation in cultural and artistic activities. Breach of this right goes hand-in-hand with the professionalisation of child sport. When sport stops being about play, sport is very rarely about enjoyment – it becomes something children are obliged to do, not something they choose.

Swept under the carpet

Bailey recalled a discussion he had with an unnamed English Premier League football coach in 2007 on the situation.

“Most of the kids don’t actively choose the pressures of top-flight football. I mean, they do at the start, but that’s really a dream they’re buying,” said the coach.

“They turn up when they are seven or eight saying ‘I want to be like Beckham or Gerrard’, but they don’t know what it means. How can they? They are only babies. Next thing they know, they are being pushed to give up their education and to do everything for football. And the irony is we know that most will never make it.”

For many in the sporting world the problem appears to just be swept under the carpet, even at the very top of the sporting world.

Bailey pointed out that when Matthew Pinsent, a four-time gold winning Olympic rower, complained about abuse of young Chinese gymnasts, even IOC chief Jacques Rogge tried to dismiss the issue as being blown out of proportion, justifying it in terms of cultural relativism.
Take the children away from the Olympic movement

by Kirsten Sparre

He has made his name as one of the world’s most persistent anti-doping fighters, but Italian Sandro Donati is also an astute observer of structural problems in sport. At Play the Game 2007, he proposed a new structure for youth sport that will separate children and youngsters from the failed practices of the Olympic sports movement that value only records.

Donati criticised international sports federations for being businesses who are mainly interested in children and preadolescents as talent pools and therefore has created a sports system that encourages many children into specialising in a particular sport at far too young an age.

It is a system in crisis, Donati said, worrying that the diffusion of doping in that system will become such a well-established practice that it is handed down to future generations.

“No parents would ever think of allowing their children to play in the same place where adults are gambling, and often also cheating. But this is exactly the environment of the sports federations where sports activities of adults and children are all too often in close contact,” Donati said and asked:

“Why should children’s enthusiasm and their energies be manipulated through a compulsory, early specialisation which has misguiding effects, instead of offering them all the values and rich variety of stimuli of sports activities aimed at self-fulfilment?”

Independent youth sport

His radical proposal is for each country to set up a Confederation for youth sports independent from the national Olympic Committee and the national sports federations.

The new confederation should establish educational sports projects for children and preadolescents from 4-12 years old based on a multilateral approach and offering different sports. The confederation should also train coaches and other trainers to handle an educational approach to sport and train executives and officials in better ways of managing the competitive aspect of sport.

Short of that, Donati encouraged countries and sports federations to consider changes in the education of coaches and executives involved in youth sports.

“Training of youth sports executives should not only be done by educators from the sports milieu but also by educators from schools, the medical profession, psychology and sociology in order to provide educational objectives with a wider scope than the mere development of sports performances,” Donati said.

He also wanted federations to establish other goals for youth sports than results, and encouraged them to allocate enough money to pursue educational objectives which, may cut down the drop-out rate and prevent excessive specialisation.

Youth Olympics not an answer

With his proposal, Donati shot down a suggestion from IOC president Jacques Rogge who wants to solve the problem of an increasingly sedentary lifestyle and the diffusion of obesity among the younger people with the institution of Youth Olympics.

“Jacques Rogge probably does not even know that sedentariness among young people and the consequent development of metabolism disorders, are also a consequence of the high drop-out rate among young practitioners. They are estranged by an environment where selection and marginalisation are the rule and where the judgement of a young person’s achievements are reduced to a mere evaluation of sports results,” Donati concluded.

The Italian anti-doping fighter, Sandro Donati, suggests that all countries set up a Confederation for youth sports in order to separate children and youngsters from the Olympic sports movement.

“This organisation, this conference is so bloody important, so many people in this room that comes from various countries, various different newsrooms, and various different organizations where they are essentially alone. They are alienated, they have no backup. What Play the Game provides us with is a community of likeminded people. Your organization is extraordinarily important”.

Declan Hill, Canadian Journalist and PhD student, UK.
Too much pressure is placed upon children to win in sport. So says coach of the Danish Under 21s and Under 20s national football teams, Keld Bordinggaard. Coaches have to realise that elite sports, in particular football, is for adults, not children. As adults, we must step back and let kids enjoy sport – games are not there to be won, they are there to be played.

Bordinggaard has played an instrumental role in the establishment of a Danish coaching system designed to bring the foremost talent from the playground to Parken, the home of Denmark’s national team.

The biggest challenge he has had to overcome is to convince people that the professional game is not suitable for children. The rigorous training and emphasis on winning is for professional athletes, not children. Children need to enjoy football to remain motivated to play the game.

Something turns them off
Research carried out into youth football in Denmark by the Danish Football Association has found that almost 80 per cent of the under 12s teams had disappeared by the time those players turned 18. Increasing levels of foreign players within the Danish football league was also taken as a sign of a failing youth development system. In short, "something was turning kids off football," says Bordinggaard.

Some might think that the way to respond to this would be to institute professional style
training regimes from an early age to blood the next crop of stars. But as several studies have shown, early selection is not a successful way of bringing forth new talent.

**Fun football strategy**

Instead, Bordinggaard and the Danish Football Association (DBU) adopted a more radical approach. They have pioneered a new form of football especially for children, reduced to the most basic elements of the game - a game of football that would actually be a game.

Whereas as many training schemes have been based upon the same principles as adult sport, this one was completely tailored to children. The idea, says Bordinggaard, was to “create a playful environment, which could of give us something that we don’t give the children in our structured programmes.”

Children are pigeonholed into certain positions because of their size in order to win matches - big kid at the back, and the slow one in goal - more often than not for the glory of the coach rather than the players themselves. This does not mean they are having fun, however.

The new approach was designed in such a way that children would have the freedom to express themselves on the pitch, rather than follow the orders of coaches more interested in wins and losses than fun.

**Nobody wants to lose**

“Where winning is everything, you are nothing when you lose, and who wants to be nothing?” warns Bordinggaard. Children and adults have different attitudes to sport – kids participate in sport to have fun, while adults participate to win.

And it is with fun and play in mind that Bordinggaard is looking to bring forward the next generation of Danish footballers.

“The wish to give children a lifelong relationship with football and to develop top players is walking hand in hand along this road,” says Bordinggaard.

As he points out, all the top players in the world have something in common. As kids they didn’t just learn the game, they played it.

**India lacks structure to nurture athletes**

For Kaveri Prakash it was all over by the time of her 18th birthday

by Kirsten Sparre

Kaveri Prakash from India is 18 years old, and she already talks about her athletic career in the past tense. The young psychology student is a prime example of the problems that characterise sport in India: even if there is a will and a talent, there is no infrastructure to support and nurture that talent.

A travel grant from Play the Game’s sponsors in the Danish and Norwegian associations for sports journalists allowed Prakash to travel to Iceland and talk about the problems of sport in one of the world’s most populous countries.

Prakash pointed to recent research, which shows that only half of the primary schools in India have playing fields, and in secondary schools access to playing fields has actually gone down in the past five years. The high point of competitive sport happens when pupils are in 7-9th grades, but mostly at inter-school levels. As soon as athletes have to travel to compete against others at district level, participation declines by 80 per cent.

Encouraged by her mother who had been a village with a male coach,” says Prakash.

Sexual harassment

Sexual harassment was a contributory factor to Prakash’s decision to stop doing sports. When she played hockey at school level, her coach had an affair with one of the players, called the other names and grabbed at them.

“Sexual harassment is definitely one of the biggest challenges for sport in India. A lot of us on the hockey team dropped out. Also, India is such a protective country, so many parents would not send their daughter to some meet in a village with a male coach,” says Prakash.

India is currently in the process of adopting and implementing a new national sports policy with the ambitious goal of providing universal access to sports and physical education for all classes of citizen, in all segments of society and across all age groups. It also suggests building more sports facilities and fostering a sports club culture in India.

Prakash was coached by a former marathon runner who did it for free. When she showed some talent for running she went to competitions at district level. Self-financed of course, travelling on second-class trains and staying in very bad conditions at the site of the meets. Eventually she gave it up and with that her time as an athlete was over.

“In India you either give yourself up totally to athletics, or you concentrate on your academics. Once you give up, there is nothing you can do in terms of sport,” Prakash explains.