

## Fair play in sport not easy to define in a high-tech age, expert says

July 27 2012, By Craig Chamberlain

---



Is the competition between the athletes, or the scientists and engineers? We need to define what we want sport to be given that technologies “are only going to come faster and more furiously in the future,” says Rayvon Fouché, a historian of technology and former cyclist, working on a book about sport technology and the future of athletic competition. Credit: Joyce Seay-Knoblauch

(Phys.org) -- The technological edge can come in a swimmer’s revolutionary suit, in a cyclist’s specialized bike, in any athlete’s drug of choice – whether legal, untraceable or not yet banned.

Why are we quick to judge only some of this as cheating? And why are sport governing bodies so slow to address the inequalities, and then often after the fact?

One reason is that we’re stuck on a notion of “fair play” that is not what sport is about, says Rayvon Fouché, a University of Illinois historian of technology working on a book about sport technology and the future of

athletic competition. We also haven't decided what we want sport to be in light of rapid technological advancements.

"In sport, there's very little incentive to play fair, and there are huge incentives to try to get an advantage," says Fouche, a former elite-level amateur cyclist.

"The goal of sport is to get the largest legal advantage you can. It's not about fairness; it's about inequalities," he said. "Athletes themselves are motivated to exploit this inequality to a logical conclusion."

And all the more so at the elite or Olympic level, Fouché said, where the difference between winning and losing, gold or silver or nothing at all, might depend on hundredths of a second, or the slightest edge.

"We as fans want desperately to have this fine line between the person who cheated and the person who did not cheat," Fouché said, but that line is "very gray and murky," especially regarding the use of drugs and other substances.

What's more, the line is continually changing, he said. "You're seen as cheating because you're breaking the sets of rules and regulations that have been defined at one moment in time."

Athletes, for instance, are prohibited from using certain types of banned substances, Fouché said, yet some sports allow for liberal use of over-the-counter painkillers and stimulants such as caffeine. A new type of equipment might be allowed one year, then banned the next.

"From my perspective, when you get to that elite level of sport, you know everyone's doing something. It may be legal or illegal, but people are trying to find every advantage," he said. That's one reason we need to be more understanding with athletes pursuing a championship who

choose to take what may be “one next small step” that’s judged to be crossing the line, he said.

“We need a long, lengthy discussion about what sport needs to be, and from my perspective, it needs to begin with acknowledging the role that technology and science play in sport,” from the substances athletes ingest to the equipment they use, Fouché said.

In some cases, the equipment can be so important that a competition is less one of athlete versus athlete than of engineer versus engineer, he said. Yet sport governing bodies often “put their heads in the sand” when faced with new innovations, instead of dealing with their ramifications up front.

Even athletes often want to believe, out of pride, that it’s all in their performance and not dependent on the equipment – that “it’s the motor, not the machine,” he said.

The new swimsuits used by some swimmers at the 2008 Olympics are a good example, Fouché said. The record books were rewritten by swimmers wearing the suits, and then the suits were banned two years later. “It’s doubtful that anyone will break those records ever again,” he said.

In a different example from years earlier, a governing body for cycling rewrote the rules for equipment after years of technical improvements, then threw out the previous records set on bikes that did not meet the new, more-restrictive standards, Fouché said.

Oscar Pistorius, the South African runner with two artificial legs participating in this year’s Olympics, “opens up a huge can of worms for the future of sport,” Fouché said. “Now our perception of who and what kind of bodies compete in able-bodied Olympics is totally changing, and

that’s an issue that hasn’t been thought out yet.”

What if new carbon-fiber running blades can be developed, for instance, that will improve Pistorius’ performance? Fouché asks. Will they be allowed without question?

In his upcoming book, Fouché is looking at “how we continually push for the idea that the athletic body, the athletic competitor, is the most important part of the sporting competition.”

“The technologies that participate in reshaping sport are only going to come faster and more furiously in the future,” Fouché said, “and if we don’t have a grasp on how we would like to define sport, it’s going to become a huge mess.”

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Citation: Fair play in sport not easy to define in a high-tech age, expert says (2012, July 27)  
retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2012-07-fair-sport-easy-high-tech-age.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.