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Drugs in Elite Sport in the German 'Doping' Republic

Doping: the secret instrument of the sports miracle?

The contribution of illegal and unethical performance-enhancing substances towards the triumphs of GDR athletes is a bitterly contested issue. For some the widespread central doping programme is emblematic of a ruthless totalitarian state, for others this kind of criticism is symptomatic of a failure to appreciate the positive aspects of GDR sport and society. As we discuss in Chapter 7, the official explanation for sporting success focused on the mutual benefits of the intertwining of elite and popular sport in a socialist society that, unlike the capitalist variant, was typically characterised by equal and ample opportunities for all citizens to develop their intellectual and physical capacities. SED leaders Ulbricht and Honecker hailed the GDR commitment to making sports and physical culture an everyday need for everyone and, as we have seen, this right is enshrined in the GDR Constitution. Doping was antithetical to this mission. A pamphlet issued in 1978 for explaining the GDR sports system to a wide audience denied accusations that the sports miracle was achieved through 'the poison of doping' and unashamedly asserted that the GDR, in conjunction with the other socialist states, was one of the leaders in the fight against the doping 'nightmare' characteristic of commercialised sport in the capitalist countries.¹ Not only did officials such as Ewald deny any significant role for doping in GDR sporting success but they also lauded the state's fight for a drug-free sport both domestically and internationally. It is perhaps not surprising then that Ewald, in his 1994 memoirs, sought to obscure the truth: while he had little alternative to admitting that some GDR athletes, with the assistance of their trainers, for example, in Mielke's Dynamo Sports Association, had recourse to illegal drugs, he rejected

the existence of a state-inspired comprehensive doping programme and, therefore, any personal responsibility for, and knowledge of, its implementation. He was, however, keen to stress the prevalence of doping in West Germany, the USA and many other countries and to highlight the active contribution of the GDR's Central Doping Control Laboratory in Kreischa to an effective international doping control system in the interest of a clean and fair sport.²

Given the access since 1990 to many of the secrets of the GDR doping programme, which help refute Ewald's protestations of ignorance, the balance of evidence clearly points to the essential role played in the sporting 'miracle' by the widespread and intensive doping of elite sportsmen and women and numerous minors in sports such as swimming, track and field events, weightlifting and gymnastics. Anabolic-androgenic steroids, such as Oral-Turinabol tablets, were the key compound in that their hormonal properties significantly boosted performance by improving muscle strength, enhancing aggressiveness and facilitating a more intensive training regime. In addition, the GDR used amphetamines, human growth hormones and blood boosting, and its scientists and officials covered up the evidence of positive tests. One of the central figures in the design and implementation of doping policy, Dr Manfred Höppner, was convinced that the GDR's international success depended on the use of anabolic-androgenic steroids and the development of new substances and methods. As he informed his Stasi controlling officer in 1975, training alone was insufficient to reach the desired standard.³ Unlike Ewald and many other top sports officials since 1990, he did admit his involvement in the systematisation of doping but disingenuously denied any intention to harm athletes. While figures cannot be precise, the state-inspired doping programme affected perhaps as many as 10,000 athletes. Not only was cheating at the centre of the programme but the abuse of the athletes' health was too. Female athletes, including adolescents, experienced virilisation symptoms and possibly as many as 1,000 sportsmen and women suffered serious and lasting physical and psychological damage.⁴

While the existence of a state doping programme on a mass scale from the mid-1970s onwards is undeniable, the significance of so many of its central elements continues to arouse heated debate, especially over issues such as: whether doping was the essential determinant of the sports miracle; how innovative GDR scientists were in devising and applying pharmacological substances to sport; how rivalries between domestic political and sports groups impacted on the organisation and development of doping; the degree to which the GDR doping