

# “Neutral Athletes”: The Russia Ban, Drugs and the Olympics

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Image: 1980 Moscow Olympics

*Being a moralist in the Olympics doesn't carry you very far. Turn one way, and there are enterprising drug cheats; turn another, there are wads of cash in envelopes finding their inexorable way to an official's accounts. The challenge of the Olympics is, in a fundamental way, a challenge of institutional decay, ruination and sport as profit.*

Having the International Olympic Committee banish a state from a competition that is itself compromised is a truly tall order. It reeks, by its nature, of falsely applied judgment. In the case of the [Russia ban](#) for the Winter Olympics to be held in Pyeongchang, the pot has assumed judgment over the kettle.

The decision assumes that a particular state has gone defiantly rogue to an extraordinary degree while presuming a state of near decent purity on the part of the entire family of Olympic nations. According to [Samuel Schmid](#), chair of the commission report submitted to the IOC charging Russia with an extensive doping program, “We have never seen any such manipulation and cheating and this has caused unprecedented damage to Olympism and to sports.”

The statement resembles a holed raft awaiting its inevitable sinking. As always with such observations, history is risibly ignored in favour of the inglorious present. Doping, after all, was the preserve of state sponsored, and engineered perfection, for decades during the Cold War. The body beautiful became the patriotic instrument, suitably tanked and packed by doping. That's Olympism for you.

In the current era, the field of performance enhancement supplements and medications is notoriously shifting. What is to be banned or not as assisting the athlete's performance leaves the administrators baffled. Technically, anything medical, anything soothing, and anything to salve the stretched body, could constitute assistance. Little wonder, then, that the World Anti-Doping Agency has had its work cut out for it, having itself been accused of unevenness.

This notion of the eviscerated state, and institutional morality, supplies us with the option of where the idea of athlete neutrality might be taken. [IOC President Thomas Bach](#) expressed his regret at the decision's impact on athletes who had complied with the rules. “As an athlete myself, I am feeling very sorry for all the clean athletes from all (National Olympic Committees) who are suffering from this manipulation.”

To that end, the IOC has permitted Russia to compete as neutral athletes called “Olympic

Athletes from Russia”, to be determined by a panel headed by the chair of the Independent Testing Authority, Valerie Fournayron. (Russia has been scoldingly told that they supply \$15 million to that authority.)

While this will be understandably sneered at in Russian circles, the precedent might well offer a blessing in rather well kept disguise. Why not consider taking the symbolic flag out of Olympic sports altogether, along with any patriotic vestiges? A little tinkering with this concept and a different variant of Olympism might be forged. Taken in its unadulterated way, the state can be removed from the equation, or at the very least minimised in its influence. Keep the pursuit of the Olympics, but abolish the nonsensical notion of competing under what would amount to entrenched national sponsorship.

The flag of a country, after all, forcefully implies a commitment of allegiance and show pony status, the sponsored performer, the hired hand appointed to do approved tricks. To march with and under the expansive flag – a specific national flag, that is – into a stadium or an arena of competition suggests an instrumental purpose for the competitor. You are not so much advancing yourself as your country’s credentials.

Bearing that symbol suggests benefits, state worship and loyalty. It also advises athletes to be slavish, leaving aside individual autonomy in favour of state policies. The policies might be extreme – the Soviet-DDR model certainly affords one example, but others are not that much better. The Australian system is only better in so far as it claims to avoid prohibited doping while still keeping the psychological apparatus in play. This is specifically true for swimmers, who tend to resemble psychological wrecks after an Olympic performance.

Given the stresses athletes already face, the neutrality status may have something going for it. Throw out the oppressive national and nationalist nonsense. Focus on the healthy competition for its sake, sinews, sweat and skill, not the people or entities sponsoring or forcing it. Focus on the sheer gravitas, the imposing physicality of human performance, rather than the manipulative politics and crude finance. This would have an added incentive: taking another layer of the corrupt mechanics and the ceremonial circus lies behind modern Olympism.

Shifting the focus to individual athletes as performers removes the demanding middle man, the all-seeing parent ever in threat of disapproval. Admittedly, that middle man tends to have the resources to back the athlete, generous yet compromising largesse. Removing such entities banishes a particular form of global middle management. To dare this is to dream for a new form of athletic governance. Farewell pigs in clover and welcome the genuine punters.

Unfortunately, the nationalist sentiment beats strongly, fighting any notion of neutrality. The treatment of Russia is popular in various fraternities, notably those who see their own states as noble backers rather than compromised masters. The aesthetic might be important, but it never trumps the chest thumping, the patriotic coaches, and the number crunchers back in the home state seeking medals.

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