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Crossing the Line

By Dónal Thompson



Olympic Runners on a Greek Urn

The 2008 Olympic Games begin on 8th August and I hope there are no children are watching! The Olympic ideal of '*mens sana in copore sano*' is as laughable as a bald man's comb.

Athletes are supposed to be role models for children. At least, when I was a child they were. They represented the triumph of will over adversity. Work hard, be faithful and you will, if not win, at least compete with dignity. That was the message.

How things change!

There have always been cheats - people who confuse crossing the line first with winning. But it was in 1988 when 'doping' became an international issue. Ben Jonson, in the 100 meters race in the Seoul Olympics, used steroids to win a gold medal. He was supposed to use his legs.

Cycling may never fully recover from the shock of the entire Festina team being banned from the Tour de France for having suitcases of doping material with them. There were rumours of doping in that race for many years before.

Such is the effect of these elite cheats that doping is now appearing in amateur sport. School students

are finding that steroids are cheap and easily obtainable. In the USA 4% of teenagers (mainly boys) have used anabolic steroids in the past year.

We are used to cheating in football. Every time a player falls down pretending to be fouled we get angry (if it's their player) or shrug (if it's ours). Football stopped being sport a long time ago.

But the Olympic Games are supposed to be noble. We've all seen "Chariots of Fire". Surely we all know the story of the Jamaican bobsleigh team who fought against all ridicule and technical problems after their first Olympics Games in Calgary?

They went on to beat the USA and Russia in subsequent competitions. No drugs. No cheating.

And they don't even have snow in Jamaica!

But what can you do? Now some athletes take 'masking agents' which hide illegal substances. For every drug test developed there will be some cheating chemist finding ways round it.

But it is not the chemists who take the drugs. Nor the team doctors. Nor the trainers.

The sole responsibility to take drugs out of sport lies with the athletes themselves. It is question of restoring sporting values.

In English a person who enters into the spirit of things is called "a good sport". If you do something against the rules you are "not playing the game" and "it's not cricket".

Doped sportspeople should be ashamed of themselves. If they are not, we should make them be. Honesty is not something to flirt with. We must be married to it.

It should start in the home, continue at school until it eventually regains its place on a podium in an Olympic stadium.