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Published

2024

Journal Title

Sport, Ethics and Philosophy

Version

Version of Record (VoR)

DOI

[10.1080/17511321.2024.2432949](https://doi.org/10.1080/17511321.2024.2432949)

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To cite this article: Nick Gibbs, Timothy Piatkowski & Luke Turnock (27 Nov 2024): Down the greasy slope: the fatal contradictions of anti-doping, *Sport, Ethics and Philosophy*, DOI: 10.1080/17511321.2024.2432949

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17511321.2024.2432949>



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Published online: 27 Nov 2024.



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Down the greasy slope: the fatal contradictions of anti-doping

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ABSTRACT

This article seeks to critically question the internal logic and coherence of 'anti-doping' through the case study of advantage-seeking practices in the sport of Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu (BJJ). We provide an analysis of the recent controversy between high-profile fighters Gordon Ryan and Nicky Rod involving the relative morality of image and performance enhancing drug (IPED) use compared with 'greasing', whereby BJJ athletes apply substances, such as oil or lubricants, to the body to make it harder for opponents to establish a grip or maintain control during grappling exchanges. We employ this case study to highlight the impasse between the World Anti-Doping Agency's (WADA) ethical foundation of the 'spirit of sport' and the anti-doping industry's 'anti-policy' stance. We then query why a host of non-chemical advantage-seeking practices are normalised and overlooked within the rigid and constrictive systems. Ultimately, we characterise WADA as a myopic compliance system that stifles moral debate around advantage-seeking in sport and is hamstrung by an ethical discord between anti-policy and the neo-Aristotelian ideal of the spirit of sport. We close with a call for a holistic ethical understanding of advantage-seeking in sport and the need to encourage stakeholders to 'think institutionally' in order to establish a malleable and reactive response to doping.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 5 August 2024
Accepted 19 November 2024

KEYWORDS

Anti-doping; Brazilian jiu-jitsu; greasing; anti-policy; ethics; spirit of sport

Introduction

The discourse of 'anti-doping' has a unique hold over the international sporting community, the global media, and the academy alike (Fink et al. 2019; Havnes et al. 2020). Doping is generally understood as the violation of the World Anti-Doping Agency's (WADA) notion of 'the spirit of sport' (WADA 2017), most commonly manifested as athletes in regulated competitions using substances that appear on the organisation's 'Prohibited List' (WADA 2023). However, over the course of this article, we wish to critique the utility of anti-doping as a means of regulating advantage-seeking in sport and critically question the applicability of 'the spirit of sport' in the context of WADA's doping-industrial

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complex. The framework through which we will make this argument is Walters (2008) notion of 'anti-policy', wherein WADA's efforts will be understood as a deontological compliance system that is incapable of fulfilling the neo-Aristotelian ethics of the spirit of sport, and therefore powerless to react to non-chemical and novel forms of doping.

In this work, we understand doping as a broad ethical issue and, rather than being limited just to the ingestion of banned substances, recognise that it ought to be understood as actions that unfairly enhance performance and run counter to the ethics of sport. Here, we draw on the work of Schubert and Könecke (2015) as they base their understanding of doping according to the axes of legality and legitimacy, perceiving what they term 'classical doping' as being that which is both illegal and illegitimate in a sporting context. Synthesising the literature, Schubert and Könecke (2015) find consensus in the idea that doping behaviours are those which are in contradiction with the following: athletes' health; fairness and equal opportunity as sport-intrinsic principles; naturalness of sporting performances; and exemplary function of sport and its athletes. However, there is one point upon which we depart from Schubert and Könecke. They term actions that are considered illegitimate but not illegal as 'illegitimate enhancement' (Schubert and Könecke 2015, 69), separating this from the concept of doping. As will become evident, however, we take a broader view of doping as actions that enhance sporting ability but run counter to the spirit of sport ideal. This neo-Aristotelian position recognises non-chemical doping as well as the use of prohibited substances, presenting a challenge to current anti-doping frameworks.

The vehicle through which we will attempt to demonstrate the shortfalls of the current anti-doping framework is the sport of Brazilian Jui-Jitsu (BJJ), with specific attention paid to the recent controversy surrounding the practice of 'greasing' compared to chemical enhancement. Greasing can be defined as the practice of applying substances, such as oil or lubricants, to the body to make it more difficult for opponents to establish a grip or maintain control during grappling exchanges. This tactic has swept the BJJ community, furnishing us with a periscope through which to examine the current anti-doping framework's inability to arbitrate on the morality of cheating in elite sport. We will argue that greasing is an example of *non-chemical doping* and will therefore employ the recent controversy around greasing and chemical doping in BJJ to ask pertinent questions around enhancement, ethics and sporting morality. Our central argument, therefore, coheres around the question: *why is the current anti-doping framework incapable of addressing non-chemical doping in the same way that it regulates the ingestion of prohibited chemical substances?*

The War on Doping

Efforts to tackle doping in sport are far from new. Since 2004, WADA has updated their Code annually and, responding to developments and mutations in the image and performance enhancing drug (IPED) market (Paoli and Donati 2014; Gibbs 2023; Piatkowski, Gibbs, and Dunn 2023; Turnock and Gibbs 2023), the Prohibited List has grown steadily to include a large array of ergogenic compounds. The purported aims of the WADA Programme and the Code are to care for athletes' fundamental right to participate in doping-free sport and thus promote health, fairness and equality in line with 'the spirit of sport'. WADA also seeks to oversee harmonised, coordinated and

effective anti-doping programmes at the international and national levels, covering the detection, deterrence and prevention of doping (Mottram 1999). However, despite wielding a great deal of political and legal clout, WADA has faced some critique from the academy. Møller (2016), for example, contends that anti-doping efforts under WADA have been unsuccessful and counter-productive, as they fail to protect athletes' right to participate in doping-free sport, do not offer significant health protection, and are ineffective in ensuring fairness and equality for athletes worldwide. More recently, significant gaps and the need for further reform have been identified within the revised 2021 World Anti-Doping Code, raising concerns about its overall effectiveness in safeguarding athletes' interests and promoting clean sport (Kambhampati and Star 2021). However, much of this critique exists at the level of pragmatic delivery and not, as we seek to offer, at the systemic level.

Bucking this trend, van de Ven and Mulrooney (2014) level their ire more broadly as they argue that the anti-doping industry has crept ominously into non-competitive spaces, characterising the monolith of WADA as a sprawling omnipresence with a proclivity to overstep its fundamental remit (see also Christiansen 2011; van de Ven 2016). Similarly, Coomber (2014) has noted how broader attitudes to illicit recreational drugs, and the attendant punitive policies to regulate them, have led to a fear-driven anti-doping framework that misunderstands and overreacts to the moral threat of IPEDs. The result of this, Hunt, Dimeo, and Jedlicka (2012) argue, is a 'moral crusade' more in line with the ill-fated and heavily critiqued war on drugs than sports governance. Moreover, Pitsch and Gleaves (2021) contend that many of anti-doping's normative arguments rely on 'unverified empirical premises' which, according to McNamee (2012), have led to highly individualised and punitive sanctions that fail to address the wider issues at play (see also Aubel and Ohl 2014). More interestingly still, Geeraets (2018) provides a robust critique of WADA's 'spirit of sport', contending that the central 'ethical pillar' that supports anti-doping is inherently ideological and undermines athletes' 'voluntary' involvement. However, this paper will make the argument that it is not WADA's spirit of sport foundation which ought to be critiqued if we are to reflect on the ineffectiveness of anti-doping. Instead, we will contend that it is its 'anti-policy' framework which makes the spirit of sport an impotent ideal and straightjackets any attempts to regulate non-chemical and novel forms of doping.

Anti-Doping as Anti-Policy

Given this paper's central argument, it is now worth establishing what we understand by the term 'anti-policy' and how anti-doping is enmeshed in a tapestry of similar anti-policies in late capitalist life. Casting a critical eye on the contemporary landscape of governance, William Walters (2008) has noted that our everyday existence is increasingly regulated by what he terms 'anti-policy'. Put simply, this phenomenon includes policy efforts like anti-poverty, anti-terrorism, anti-corruption, and anti-racism, which set out to vanquish the great scourges of our time. Worthy causes we can all agree, but Walters argues that these forms of governance are essentially empty vessels 'which derive whatever legitimacy they enjoy from the claim that their objective [is] to repress bad things' (Walters 2008, 270) and serve to appease public concern rather than truly address the panoply of harms that these large-scale issues represent. The swell of anti-policies is

arguably built upon their seductively unopposable premise: that the bad thing (in our instance, doping in sport) is morally problematic and ought to be combatted. Kuldova ((2022), 22, italics added) sums this up:

'Anti-policies build consensus around that which *nobody can be for* (Walters 2008). They are typically fuelled by scandals and mediated outrage. As such, they are a seductive tool. After all, to be seen doing "the right thing" is a vital currency in a world driven by reputations and scandals. And with each scandal we also see this demand for remedy: more anti-policies, more zero tolerance visions (Newburn & Jones, 2007), more ethical guidelines, more standards and best practices, more accountability, more audits, and more detailed implementations on the principles of "good governance", all of which seek to eradicate this or that crime, harm, or moral failing' (Shore, 2008; Shore & Wright, 2015).'

Anti-doping, we argue, is yet another example of anti-policy that functions to allow governance to be seen to be done the right thing and taking a moral stance on doping in organised sport, without ever truly engaging with the moral and ethical debates at play. The discourse and infrastructure built around anti-doping therefore acts to satisfy fans' and officials' yearning to 'do something about the issue'. However, as Kuldova goes on to note, a step in the right direction may be viewed as progress, to the detriment of any critical analysis of the anti-policy itself. This, we argue, is where we find ourselves with WADA and anti-doping. This claim is implicitly supported by Dimeo (2016, 104), whose cutting critique of the 'clean sport' ideal argues that:

'[Anti-doping discourse] paints a picture of present-centred crisis, a loss of ethical direction, that needs resources, regulations and punishments in order to be recovered and the future to become a better place. Therefore, it is a strategy about power enhancement, indeed power over athletes and their entourage, that places control with centralised authorities who can impose their will over those defined as 'transgressors'.

Dimeo all but describes anti-doping as a form of anti-policy here, exemplifying the sway that the movement has over the sporting world. Similarly, as noted by Hunt, Dimeo, and Jedlicka (2012), the anti-doping industry exercises the power to ban and expel 'cheats' from sport and acts as the self-appointed arbitrator of fairness according to strict anti-policy compliance standards. This is propped up by the numerous scientists and other professionals involved in testing programmes, athlete education, and compliance, whose legitimacy somewhat justifies WADA's existence.

Kuldova ultimately outlines an eight-component 'anti-policy syndrome' which includes (amongst others) the moral obligation to act, a reliance upon specific modes of knowledge and data-led expertise, and a deontological form of ethics. She situates the rise of anti-policies within the broader securitisation of society, wherein risk is pre-emptively managed through '*anticipatory* forms of governance' (Kuldova 2022, 5, italics in original). Crucially, Walters (2008) notes that *governance* need not mean *government* and therefore bodies like WADA and its multitude of 'national anti-doping organisations' (NADOs), alongside a wealth of private sector organisations, have become the 'little others' (Winlow and Hall 2012) that arbitrate issues like doping. Ultimately, to borrow again from Kuldova (2022, 22, italics in original), much of organised sport may well be *anti-doping*, but 'what are we *for*? Which advantage-seeking practices are morally just, and which ought to be punished and mitigated against? These enquiries open up a thornier question about the ethics of elite sport and how we should understand advantage-

seeking not just in relation to chemical enhancement, but to a raft of forms of one-upmanship that pervade elite sporting environments.

Though we contend that doping has become subject to this form of governance, we should also acknowledge the very real health risks that accompany the consumption of the various substances being prohibited. Indeed, this article does not set out to deny the existence of doping-related harms or the unfairness of athletes taking performance enhancing substances to gain an advantage over their peers. The use of compounds on the banned list, particularly anabolic steroids, is underscored by a raft of physiological issues, including urogenital problems, insomnia, injection site pain, liver disease, and cardiovascular disease (van Amsterdam, Opperhuizen, and Hartgens 2010), as well as adverse mental health effects (Chegeni et al. 2021; Scarth et al. 2022). Thus, whilst we wish to make a case for a more expansive and situated understanding of ‘doping’ that challenges the anti-policy fundamentals at play, we are certainly not diminishing the need to protect athletes’ health and well-being. Neither are we setting out to advocate for an end to drug testing in sport and a no-holds-barred ‘enhanced’ sporting environment (Savulescu, Foddy, and Clayton 2004), as has been proposed in Aron D’Souza’s ‘Enhanced Games’ startup (Richardson 2024). Instead, we seek to problematise the current anti-policy framework of anti-doping and make the case for a fuller understanding of the concepts of advantage-seeking, fairness, and sporting inequality.

The Ethical Impasse of Anti-Doping

Owing to its anti-policy ethos, we argue that anti-doping is suspended in an ethical impasse. This stalemate arises from the contrast between the neo-Aristotelian principles of the spirit of sport and the Kantian deontological inflexibility of anti-policy. More simply, WADA’s twin ethical pillars are entirely at odds with one another, with the spirit of sport being an example of positive ethics, and the anti-policy framework being underpinned by negative ethics.

As noted above, WADA claim that the ‘spirit of sport’ ideal underlies their anti-doping operations and supposedly provides the ethical prism through which decision-making is informed. The ideal, which is rooted in historical notions of Olympic sporting amateurism (Ritchie 2015), is defined by WADA (2017) as:

... the essence of Olympism, the pursuit of human excellence through the dedicated perfection of each person’s natural talents. It is how we play true. The spirit of sport is the celebration of the human spirit, body and mind, and is reflected in values we find in and through sport, including: Ethics, fair play and honesty; Health; Excellence in performance; Character and education; Fun and joy; Teamwork; Dedication and commitment; Respect for rules and laws; Respect for self and other Participants; Courage; Community and solidarity.

The spirit of sport thus emphasises ideals such as ethics, fair play, and respect, promoting an aspirational vision of sporting excellence, and advocating for a holistic appreciation of sport that transcends rule compliance. This ethical position, we argue, is based on the Aristotelian concept of *telos*, ‘a final cause or purpose that benefits the wider social body or humanity more generally’ (Raymen 2024, 168). The ideal provides competitors with a common, collective purpose that drives towards WADA’s notion of *good sport*. Aristotle ties the foundational concept of *telos* tightly to the idea of

human flourishing, and, if we prescribe to a neo-Aristotelian position, the governing question in life should be *'how do I live virtuously and well?'* (Cohen-Almagor 2017; Lemos 2007). As Raymen (2023, 105) notes, 'Neo-Aristotelian ethics sees morality not as a given or as something that can be practised by simply obediently following rules, but as an achievement'. Therefore, WADA's spirit of sport is fundamentally Aristotelian as it provides a *positive*, aspirational guideline to competitors and their affiliates, encouraging them to embody an ethos of fairness throughout sporting competition, rather than simply and cynically following the prescribed rules. The spirit of the sport, with its emphasis on 'playing true', enjoins its adherents to subscribe to anti-doping because of the internal good of 'Ethics, fair play and honesty [...] Dedication and commitment; Respect for rules and laws; Respect for self and other Participants; Courage; Community and solidarity' (WADA 2017) rather than following the rules simply because they have to. Such adherence follows Hugh Hecló's (2008) seminal work on 'thinking institutionally', a rallying cry for us to quell our cynicism towards institutions and instead value-positive ethics and a commitment to human flourishing. This concept will be explored at length later in this paper.

However, though we (unlike many scholars) see immense value in the notion of spirit of sport, we contend that anti-doping's anti-policy approach challenges and ultimately negate this ethical foundation. As MacIntyre (2011) expertly dissects, we live in an age of disbelief and cynicism that proscribes any ascription to the positive ethics described above (see also Johnston 2004; Raymen 2024; Winlow and Hall 2012) and instead, to put it crudely, we look to interventions like the swell of anti-policies to thwart badness rather than promote goodness (Kuldova 2022).

Instead of being underpinned by the Aristotelian approach then, contemporary life—and certainly anti-policy—is rooted in a deontological form of ethics most heavily associated with Kant (see MacIntyre, 2002). Under this negative form of ethics 'doing right is made something quite independent of faring well' (MacIntyre 2002, 81) and ethics are understood as an individual duty divorced from a notion of collective good. Under such an ethical framework, 'doing right' is reimagined as compliance with the rules rather than adhering to a doctrine of human flourishing (Raymen 2024). Linking this back to anti-doping, whereas the Aristotelian ideal of spirit of sport binds the act of not consuming performance enhancing substances to the telos of good sport (fairness, competition, honesty, etc.), the deontological anti-policy position has little regard for the telos of sport and simply exists to establish a priori evils, independent of any particular conception of the Good. As such, as articulated by Dimeo (2016, 107–108) the current system of anti-policy has:

... created a series of drastic and draconian solutions, alongside a practically compulsory global compliance strategy. Rather than allow each sport or country to address its own problems, the policy landscape was revolutionised with the aim of increasing testing, enforcing meaningful sanctions, harmonization and standardization.

Important here is that the standardised anti-policy approach only allows for a cynical and compliance-based understanding of anti-doping, meaning that the spirit of sport and any attempt to understand eschewing enhancing substances as part of the telos of good sport is effectively written out of existence. This is where we encounter the ethical chasm that underpins our argument. Given that anti-policy 'sees efforts to improve the moral

character of actors within these fields as foolhardy, idealistic, and doomed to failure' (Raymen 2024, 169) the Aristotelian ethical pillar of the spirit of sport is hamstrung and all that anti-doping is capable of is retrospectively administering punishment and altering the specific compounds on its banned list.

Pertinently, it cannot draw upon positive ethics to look beyond its siloed remit of chemical enhancement and is, therefore, blind to illicit advantage-seeking practices that are not regulated within its banned list. It is this ethical log jam that we can see play out in our underpinning case study in this article: the relatively under-researched sport of Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu and a well-publicised spat between two of its leading proponents.

Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu and Advantage-Seeking Practices

Brazilian jiu-jitsu (BJJ) is a type of martial art often used in competitions alongside boxing, Muay-Thai, kickboxing, or mixed-martial arts (Andreato et al. 2017). It utilises components of grappling as well as several submissions including chokes and joint locks, traditionally performed in a 'gi' (Petrisor et al. 2019). BJJ is often used in one-on-one combat competitions, where individuals use a combination of throws and submissions with the opponent using a range of offensive and defensive sequences (Mickelsson Blomqvist 2021; Petrisor et al. 2019). Following the wider popularisation of mixed martial arts (Bishop, La Bounty, and Devlin 2013; Stan 2019) as well as recognition within its own right, BJJ has received growing attention, particularly in the no-gi class (Blomqvist Mickelsson 2020). This has propelled the sport's preeminent competitors onto the global stage and has led to something of a furore over the advantage-seeking and doping practices routinely undertaken in the pursuit of victory.

Previously, the International Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu Federation (IBJJF) was the only organisation in the sport of BJJ which was known to test athletes for steroids and enhancement drugs (IBJJF 2022). Their stance on doping was as follows: 'The IBJJF is opposed to the practice of doping in sport on ethical and medical grounds and abides by the provisions of the World Anti-Doping Code ('Code') and World Anti-Doping Agency Prohibited List ('Prohibited List')'. Recently, however, in a landmark move, the IBJJF has abolished their testing protocols (Fischer 2023), seemingly in response to several athletes being caught for doping violations (Tang 2023). This new stance more closely mirrors other internationally recognised BJJ organisations like the Abu Dhabi Combat Club (ADCC).

A key player who has contributed significantly to the rise in popularity of the no-gi BJJ is Gordon Ryan. He is recognised as the greatest no-gi grappler of all time. Ryan 'openly admits to taking performance enhancing drugs' (Meehan 2022). However, his recent candour was somewhat lacking prior to the removal of doping controls. In 2018, after testing positive for Clomiphene, he claimed that he had unknowingly ingested the substance through a contaminated supplement. Many in the BJJ community were sceptical of his explanation, given the prevalence of steroid use in the sport. Ryan was suspended for 6 months and stripped of his titles from the 2018 Pan-American Championship. Since this, he has become transparent regarding his use of IPEDs such as steroids, so much so that many viral videos have emerged with his admissions.

Following this, a separate form of performance enhancement termed 'greasing' has received similar scrutiny in the world of BJJ. The practice of 'greasing' – which describes BJJ athletes applying substances, such as oil or lubricants, to the body to make it harder

for opponents to establish a grip or maintain control during grappling exchanges—has raised questions about the nature of enhancement and cheating. This scandal has mainly been played out between Gordon Ryan and fellow elite BJJ athlete Nicky Rod. The greasing controversy involving Nicky Rod first occurred in 2019 during the ADCC World Championship. In his semi-final match against Marcus ‘Buchecha’ Almeida, Rod was accused of applying grease to his body to make it more difficult for his opponent to hold onto him (King 2022). Despite video evidence, Rod denied any wrongdoing, and no action was taken against him. These greasing accusations resurfaced recently, however, when Ryan accused Rod in their 2023 Fight Pass invitational match (Bradley 2023);

The moment he started sweating, he definitely was lotioned and the lotion came out. I couldn't get a hold of him. He was so slippery . . . [Ryan, FPI-3 Interview]

In the ensuing days, Ryan released several videos through his Instagram account, providing some further understanding to the public around the ‘issue’ (Wendling 2023). Pertinently, Rod suggested that some competitors ‘rely on steroids’ to gain a significant advantage and subsequently crowned himself as the ‘Natty King’ (referring to his ‘natural’ non-chemically enhanced status), emphasising the contrast between those who use performance-enhancing substances and those who do not.

Some of the guys that do steroids in the sport, they literally couldn't compete at all if they weren't. You're talking guys that are naturally 175, 180 pounds, and in nine months they're 230 pounds. It's fu**ing insane . . . [Rod, IBJJF Interview]

I'm very confident that a lot of these guys couldn't compete if they were natty, so I call myself the Natty King. [Rod, IBJJF Interview]

That's his excuse, he's like: ‘He put lotion on’. First of all, no, never cheated a fu**ing bit. And then on top of that, I'm a natural athlete going against a not-natural athlete and you still need excuses. [Rod, IBJJF Interview]

Nicky Rod then opted to prove his ‘natty’ status by spontaneously undergoing (and passing) a doping test conducted by a popular Youtuber. BJJ therefore presents anti-doping researchers with something of a petri dish in which to interrogate the nature of enhancement and the relative morality of IPED consumption and non-chemical forms of doping like greasing. We shall now attempt to disentangle these prescient questions and speak to the wider, often overlooked, nuances that arise, as well as interrogating this landscape as a manifestation of ‘anti-policy’.

Discussion

The Uneven Playing Field: Sporting Inequalities and Non-Chemical Doping Practices

Aligning more with Ryan, we understand greasing as an example of non-chemical doping. Greasing or ‘lotioning’ the body, as we will argue in this section, undermines the spirit of sport and is opposed to the telos of fair competition. This echoes our Aristotelian understanding of doping as not simply a compliance issue (e.g. consuming a banned substance) but one of sporting ethics and illegitimate enhancement. Indeed, the spat between Gordon Ryan and Nicky Rod introduces a far wider debate than those that generally

surround anti-doping policy. Namely, what is the relative morality of chemical doping and non-chemical doping? And how can we understand this within the current anti-policy anti-doping framework?

Nicky Rod's stance that Gordon Ryan is at an unfair advantage due to his chemical enhancement, demonstrated in his protestations that '*a lot of these guys couldn't compete if they were natty*', nicely captures the anti-policy stance espoused by WADA. In Rod's mind, the dualism of doped versus not doped is crystal clear; doping is morally wrong and therefore the only 'cheating' that has occurred is Ryan's consumption of IPEDs. Dimeo (2016, 105) sums this up in his diagnosis that '[c]ategories of doped and pure bodies—or "dirty" and "clean" to use anti-doping rhetoric—are imagined as facts' within the current framework. However, Ryan's counter accusation highlights the fundamental flaw in anti-doping's anti-policy position. If we look beyond the myopic view that chemical doping is the only problematic form of advantage-seeking, we could make the argument that Rod's alleged greasing tactics—which perhaps negate any strength increase that Ryan was able to glean from his IPED use—are just as ethically reprehensible as his competitor's. Of course, the health impacts of 'lotioning up' are negligible, especially compared with IPED consumption, but if we consider WADA's guiding principle of 'spirit of sport', is there a fundamental difference between the two? The greasing scandal, therefore, exposes the shackles that anti-doping's anti-policy position places on the ideal of the spirit of sport. If we were to subscribe to the neo-Aristotelian ideas of the telos of fair competition that are represented by the spirit of sport, we can comprehend and address the unfair advantage gained through 'lotioning up'. However, the deontological stance underpinning all anti-policies precludes such vision and, therefore, is powerless to foil Rod's brazen attempts to seek one-upmanship and understand Ryan's protestations about the relative morality of chemical versus non-chemical doping.

It is also worth pondering a few similar examples of what we consider non-chemical doping from across the elite sporting world. Sparkes and Brighton (2019) discuss the prevalence of 'boosting' by spinal cord injured athletes, whereby a condition known as autonomic dysreflexia—characterised by a sudden increase in blood pressure and blood flow to muscles as well as heightened adrenaline—is deliberately brought on to enhance performance. Given that no external compounds are ingested by 'boosting' athletes, ought we to overlook this practice just like we omit greasing from doping scrutiny in BJJ? We can also consider technological performance aids like the use of oxygen tents (Savulescu, Foddy, and Clayton 2004) and the controversial Nike Vaporfly running shoes, which stirred debate at the Tokyo 2020 Olympics over alleged 'technology doping' (Dyer 2020). Similarly, Michael Phelps' use of a full-body swimsuit—which boosts performance by compressing the body and aiding buoyancy—during the Beijing Olympics, again throws doubt about anti-doping's current stranglehold over the performance enhancement ethics of elite sport (BBC 2009; O'Connor and Vozenilek 2011). More broadly, at the time of writing, Manchester City Football Club remains in possession of their wealth of league and cup trophies despite facing 115 Financial Fair Play charges and being repeatedly accused of 'financial doping' (Morgan 2024). Can we really consider such an alleged flouting of Financial Fair Play rules to be somehow divorced from the moral debate of performance enhancement and advantage-seeking? We argue that a system of deontological compliance is incapable of arbitration on the underpinning morality of these questions, as they can only be deployed rhetorically without a suitable ethical framework.

With this said, WADA do include what Zwierzchowski and Gawel (2021) term ‘techno doping’ in their consideration of Olympic and Paralympic sports equipment, most pertinently the use of appropriate prosthesis for limb-deficient athletes and wheelchairs for sports like wheelchair basketball. Though this does represent a less siloed approach, we nevertheless contend that such a mediation is still marred by WADA’s narrow understanding of doping and a lack of ethical dexterity.

Of course, some commentators may suggest that governing bodies and league committees ought to be the umpires of issues like greasing and financial misconduct. However, we believe that the unique position of WADA and their role as guardians of the spirit of sport affords them a responsibility for wider equity in sport, including over these issues. This coheres with our broader understanding that non-chemical doping should be a concern for the WADA project, but only if it can be moved away from its current anti-policy format. Whilst sport thrives off natural and fair inequalities (e.g. one athlete’s natural ability and work ethic being better or worse than another’s), then WADA are in a unique position to oversee these notions of fair competition from above.

Demonstrative of the wider significance of the Ryan versus Rod controversy, we might also consider entrenched inequalities in competitions like the Olympics, where well-resourced nations are able to provide cutting-edge training facilities, sports science and coaching compared to swathes of developing countries (Krishna and Haglund 2008; Schubert and Könecke 2015). Such an inequality is mostly left unquestioned and is rarely considered in the discourse of anti-doping, but arguably constitutes a far deeper reaching form of inequitable advantage-seeking, particularly given the soft power posturing that characterises international sporting competitions (Cornelissen 2010; Grix and Houlihan 2013; Rawnsley 2024). Our current anti-policy understanding cannot even attempt to consider these examples. Interestingly, the questions around relative morality that we raise here are far from new. As Dimeo (2016) notes, as far back as the 1960s, doctors were questioning the emerging discourse of doping controls, with one prominent physician writing that, if used under medical supervision, the ingestion of doping substances ‘is not more unfair than the fact that one athlete will have a good coach and excellent training facilities whereas another does not’ (Hollyhock 1969, 126). These ambiguities have been summarised by Gleaves, Llewellyn, and Lehrbach (2014), 93) in their contention that the current anti-doping framework ‘cannot work looking forward. It cannot tell us why a new innovation like waxing skis is or is not contrary to its ideal. More to the point, it cannot tell us if blood transfusions are more akin to steroids or to ski wax’ (see also Brannigan 2012; Coomber 1999). As this quotation illustrates, an anti-doping anti-policy approach is unable to consider anything beyond its siloed remit of chemical doping as it is prohibitionist and static, making any ethical judgement beyond its inflexible compliance framework an impossibility. And yet, WADA prides itself on working with the underpinning ethos of the spirit of the sport, and this is where we might find some reprieve and ultimately allow anti-doping to ‘look forward’.

The Need to Return to the ‘Spirit of sport’

Obasa and Borry (2019: 452) claim that ‘the entire framework of anti-doping policy rests upon the spirit of sport concept’. For the reasons, we have outlined above, we do not necessarily agree with this statement given the anti-policy approach currently undertaken

by WADA. However, we argue that a truly flexible and ethical anti-doping system should indeed have at its core the spirit of sport. Returning to Kuldova's (2022) plea to ask what a policy is for, rather than against, we contend that the 'why' of anti-doping can be found in the spirit of sport ideal. If anti-doping were to be shorn of its anti-policy ethos, the spirit of sport could be unshackled and anti-doping could look forward as well as looking back (Gleaves, Llewellyn, and Lehrbach 2014). Arbitration of elite sport through this ethical lens delivers a critical analysis of the relative morality of doping practices like steroid consumption and greasing, oxygen tents and running shoes, and boosting and training facilities. We argue, therefore, for a *return to the spirit of sport*.

Our optimism regarding this concept does not necessarily chime with the existing literature, however. In their review of academic interpretations of the spirit of sport, Obasa and Borry (2019:452), brand it a 'multivariant concept', which they characterise as vague and contested (Henne, Koh, and McDermott 2013; Loland and Hoppeler 2012). Yet it is this malleability which we argue makes the spirit of sport a more capable ethical ideal than anti-policy compliance. The flexibility of the spirit of sport allows for a more nuanced and comprehensive approach to addressing the complexities of athletic performance and drug use, moving beyond the limitations of strict compliance and moralistic frameworks. Indeed, as Parker (2012, 337) makes clear, 'Within sport, the existence of inequalities is both presupposed as a condition of the social practice and prized as its outcome. The goal of athletic competition is to establish the inequality of the competitors vis-à-vis particular sport-relevant abilities'. Therefore, we need an anti-doping framework that allows arbitration over which inequalities adhere to the telos of good sport, and which do not.

However, we acknowledge that such an Olympic idealism is at odds with the reality of contemporary sport. Ritchie (2013, 199) captures how the spirit of sport has been somewhat hijacked by the anti-doping movement:

[T]hose involved with the creation of WADA's Code had to actively create 'sport's spirit' as a problem solving measure in light of the immediate issues facing them and in light of the latest crisis occurring in sport. A 'catch all' phrase was needed to deal with practical issues at play and to warrant inclusion of substances on the banned list in particular, and the result was the active construction of the 'Spirit of Sport'. (Ritchie 2013, 199)

Though Ritchie's (2013) statement relates more to the inclusion of recreational non-enhancing substances like cannabinoids and WADA's subsequent ability to ban compounds for political rather than sporting reasons (see Waddington et al. 2013; Obasa and Borry, 2019), it is worth unpacking here. Opposing Ritchie's cynicism of the spirit of sport ideal, we instead suggest that the reduction of the Olympic ethical ideal to a 'catch all' phrase is instead symptomatic of the anti-policy deontological ethical position. The point is that the spirit of sport has been exhumed from the anti-doping system, rather than, as Ritchie argues, being actively constructed by it. The ethical impasse between anti-policy and the spirit of sport has therefore led to the affect that Ritchie describes; the sense that WADA employs the spirit of sport ideal for cynical purposes and dismisses the telos of sporting competition on account of their questionable agenda. Again, this reality emphasises the need to return to the spirit of sport as the governing principle and free it from the trappings of anti-policy, where it is diminished and nullified as a vague justification for a backward-looking system of compliance.

However, for a return to the spirit of sport ideal to permeate the elite sporting world, a substantial cultural shift would need to occur. Just as IPED consumption can at times be understood as hyperconformist (Gibbs 2023; Kotzé and Antonopoulos 2019), it could be argued that inequitable advantage-seeking and a ‘win at all costs’ mentality constitute the current prevailing ‘spirit’ of elite sport. Undermining WADA’s Olympic idealism, doping ought, therefore, to be situated alongside practices like greasing, financial doping, inequity of resources and facilities, and sports science technology and not, as the current anti-policy framework mandates, as a standalone ill that exists exclusively in the purview of WADA and their national denominations. This sentiment is captured perfectly by Tamburrini (2006, 203):

... sport has evolved into a highly competitive, professional activity in which agents try their best to perform at their highest possible level. Unlike recreational sports – whose main traits (to have a good time and promote health) still marked competitive sport at the beginning of the twentieth century – professional sport is now driven by a desire to expand the boundaries of what hitherto was considered to be humanly possible, even by jeopardizing one’s own health. [...] Banned doping substances and techniques are therefore obviously in accordance with the “spirit” of today’s crudely competitive, highly technified sports world, as they have everything to do with the essential purpose of the athletic contest: to expand the limits of our capacities.

This extract speaks to the ethics of elite sport that exist in praxis and how Nicky Rod’s alleged greasing techniques, despite his protestations, ought not to be viewed as fundamentally morally superior, or indeed much different at all, to Ryan’s open consumption of IPEDs. Ultimately, if the underpinning drive for sportspeople is to ‘expand the limits of our capacities’, conceptualising doping exclusively through WADA’s anti-policy lens is extremely problematic. This is why we must unshackle the spirit of sport from its anti-policy trappings and allow arbitration of advantage-seeking practices according to their telos, rather than their (mal)compliance. However, as Tamburrini’s argument in some sense echoes WADA’s (2017) definition of the spirit of sport as ‘the pursuit of human excellence through the dedicated perfection of each person’s natural talents’, it could be read as defending the morality of non-chemical doping. We can easily make the argument that substances like anabolic steroids are inconducive to human health and flourishing, but the use of technology and entrenched inequalities, under Tamburrini’s argument, seem less problematic. With this said, other aspects of the spirit of sport ideal around fairness and equality somewhat negate this argument, as the process as well as the outcome of sporting conduct can be considered.

We ought also to be cognisant of the spectacle of elite sport and its function as a highly profitable artifact of consumption (Carrington and McDonald 2008). Using BJJ as an example, it is no coincidence that drug testing has been removed exactly at the time when the sport—and its competitors—are gaining enhanced commercial success. Thus, advantage-seeking in its various forms is ultimately far from deviant when we consider both athlete motivation and commercial intent. Given this reality then, can our current straightjacketed view of anti-doping and its place in the moral dimension of sport really provide us with anything more than a punitive compliance system for ‘drug cheats’? Doping, we suggest, has become the proverbial bark for those moral arbitrators who cannot see the wood for the trees.

We can therefore situate the problem as follows: the spirit of sport cannot be realised as an ethical framework within a system of anti-policy. Due to WADA's inability to look beyond compliance and banned substances, the Aristotelian concept of spirit of sport is unable to be used to arbitrate over advantage-seeking practices like greasing or boosting in the way that it could be if not bound to an anti-policy. In the absence of this guiding ethical framework, the amorality of elite sports as a 'win at all costs' industry has been allowed to run riot, as has been manifested in the greasing scandal described in this paper. In this climate, sport is viewed as an industry focused on entertainment and profit, rather than an Aristotelian pursuit of excellence (Andrews 2016). This practice prioritises commercial success over ethical considerations. The emphasis on victory incentivises athletes to use IPEDs, despite potential health risks, highlighting the disconnect between the 'spirit of sport' and the pragmatic reality. We posit that 'cheating' then becomes an acceptable strategy within a system that values outcomes over integrity. The structures governing sport, including leagues, sponsorship deals, and media coverage, create immense pressure on athletes to prioritise winning above all else. This is the true spirit of sport under a deontological ethical framework. These systems reward performance and success with financial incentives and fame, further entrenching a culture where ethical breaches are overlooked if they lead to victory. Consequently, athletes operate within a framework that implicitly condones and potentially encourages amoral advantage-seeking tactics.

It follows that substantial resources and discourse are devoted to combating doping in sport, whilst the wider inequalities and advantage-seeking practices that are not chemical in nature are allowed to flourish, adherent as they are to the *true* spirit of sport. In line with anti-doping as an anti-policy then, WADA's current deployment of the spirit of sport as an ethical system speaks to their concern to contribute towards the credibility and marketability of sport, rather than its fairness and equality of competition. Dimeo (2016, 104) notes that the current system allows 'a core group of Western, male, middle and upper class scientists and administrators [...] to protect their own power base', which of course rests upon the profitability and status of elite sporting competitions. The organisations are effectively afforded the liberty to 'look busy' with their anti-policy work, whilst shying away from the deeper conversation around sport, advantage-seeking, and systemic matters of concern. Consequently, current anti-doping anti-policy measures, rooted in prohibition and compliance, fail to address the underlying issues, and we need a return to the spirit of sport as an ethical basis in order to truly challenge the advantage-seeking practices described in this paper.

Anti-Policy and the Crisis of Relativity

Considering the swathes of chemical and non-chemical doping behaviours discussed above, and the inability for governing bodies to enact their spirit of sport ideal, we feel well positioned to make the argument that anti-doping is indeed an example of an 'anti-policy'. By premising its existence on a moral antagonism to doping behaviours, WADA have established a deontological form of ethics (Kuldova 2022) which is at odds with its own supposed ethical foundation. Working to preclude any valuable debate about the morality of the wider suite of advantage-seeking behaviours across competitive sport, this

form of anti-policy effectively neutralises much of the critical conversation about acts like greasing, financial doping, equipment and facilities, and many more inequalities that are baked into high-level sport. Indeed, as we have demonstrated with our account of the greasing controversy in BJJ, when doping controls are lifted, wider conversations about winning virtuously are allowed to play out far more conspicuously.

Walters (2008, 275) remarks that anti-policy always understands issues in 'very specific ways and is objectified by particular networks of practice'. Put more simply, WADA only understands cheating according to their own compliance framework and through a somewhat blinkered lens. This is by no means a swipe at those individuals administering the burdensome task of sparring with doping behaviours in a 'clean sport' context. Instead, given the fatal contradictions described above, WADA appear to be waging a particularly expensive and bureaucratic war, on terms that only they themselves have defined. WADA has become society's sole prism through which to understand the issue of doping. This is captured nicely by Walters (2008, 280) in his observation that anti-policies 'impose a system of technocratic expertise upon a space that otherwise might be considered a site of political controversy and public dialogue'. Instead, WADA and the various NADOs effectively monopolise the conversation, limiting most mainstream discussion to familiar discourse about whether certain drugs should be banned or not, and whether the bans they hand out are equitable and proportionate. Their anti-policy stance also nullifies any critical layperson discussion around what might or might not be adherent to the spirit of sport, leaving controversies like the greasing saga described in this paper to play out in the media as opposed to the institutions that ought to arbitrate fairness in sport.

Going further, it could be argued that anti-doping also adheres to Walters' idea of the *positivity* of anti-policy. He states that 'the objective of negating things frequently goes hand-in-hand with calling something new into existence' (Walters 2008, 275). Would the concept of doping even exist without its old adversary anti-doping? Of course, the use of enhancing compounds long predates current conceptions of anti-doping (Holt, Erotokritou-Mulligan, and Sönksen 2009; Paoli and Donati 2014) but it was the anti-doping movement that arbitrated that these behaviours ought to be cast as doping and their exponents ensnared in the punitive web of WADA's punishments. In this sense, we can understand anti-doping as generative or at least complicit in the moral objection that it was set up to overcome.

Ultimately, we find ourselves in something of a crisis in relativity. On the one hand, anti-doping policies mount a moral crusade against chemical performance enhancement, condemning it as a serious ethical breach. On the other hand, numerous non-chemical doping practices, which align with the prevailing 'win-at-all-costs' ethos of elite sport, are systematically ignored or downplayed as routine elements of competitive practice. For us, this ethical contradiction revokes any claims for moral ascendance from bodies like WADA and positions anti-doping as just another example of anti-policy syndrome (Kuldova 2022), shorn from its supposed foundation of the spirit of sport.

Concluding Thoughts: Is it Time to Think Institutionally About Doping?

This paper has sought to answer the question: *why is the current anti-doping framework incapable of addressing non-chemical doping in the same way that it regulates the ingestion*

of prohibited chemical substances? We have argued that the crux of the answer is the fundamental misalignment of anti-doping's anti-policy status with its Aristotelian ethical ideal of the spirit of sport. We hope to have made a convincing case for anti-doping being a strident example of anti-policy, as conceived by Walters (2008), due to its static, compliance-centred negative ethical position. A position which is incapable of 'looking forward' (Gleaves, Llewellyn, and Lehrbach 2014) and therefore ill-equipped to apply the ideal of the spirit of sport, upon which it supposedly rests. To borrow the words of Dimeo (2016, 108–109), we therefore concur that '[e]ven though WADA have provided a rigorous, well-resourced, inter-connected policy environment, and built up a lot of support from governments and the media, they have not brought us much closer to the vision of clean sport'.

The Ryan vs. Rod controversy serves as a microcosm of a far broader ethical conversation in elite sport. The debate between chemical and non-chemical performance enhancement techniques exposes the internal inconsistencies of the current anti-doping anti-policy framework and exemplifies the stultifying effect that such governance and compliance systems have on moral discourse in sport (Kuldova 2022). WADA's inflexible position—represented by Rod's unambiguous 'doped vs non-doped' argument—speaks to how anti-doping, in its current form, is complicit in perpetuating what we have termed the true spirit of sport. In line with Kuldova's diagnosis of anti-policy syndrome then, WADA's protocols and remit satisfy the moral obligation to act and appease the public's concerns, whilst offering a deontological negative form of ethics which precludes the application of the spirit of sport as an ethical ideal.

So how do we move beyond the current anti-policy landscape of anti-doping and unshackle ourselves from the negative ethical conversation that omits the wider picture of non-chemical doping? And what exactly does ethical sport look like if it is not merely the absence of chemical doping? Though we certainly do not claim to have the answer, it is here that we can return to Hecló's (2008) call to 'think institutionally'. At the outset of Hecló's work, he presciently describes two world-class athletes, whom he christens Barry and Cal, who arguably embody how contemporary elite athletes currently conceive of their profession under an anti-policy anti-doping system, compared to how they might understand their role according to an Aristotelian spirit of sport ideal. Barry abides by the rules of the game but is not moved by the game's spirit or ethos. Cal, on the other hand, exhibits a deep respect for the game beyond merely the rules and, arguably, represents the amateur idealism upon which the Olympic Games are built (Dimeo 2016). Hecló (2008, 1–2, italics added) explains:

Barry is "into" succeeding in his athletic career, and Cal is "into" succeeding in the game [...]. For Barry, the game is a setting in which his athletic prowess is exercised and his accomplishments are recorded. For Cal, the game is that whole rich tradition of people and events that defines his appropriate performance. *Where Barry sees a set of rules, Cal sees an ethos.*

This differentiation embodies the competing ethical frameworks that we have argued make up the anti-doping policy. Barry's viewpoint encapsulates many athletes' understandings of WADA and other regulators as compliance organisations, who provide 'rules' (detailing which compound is banned and which is not) but offer no conception of good ethical practice. It is the Barrys of the sporting world who commit wholeheartedly to what we have called the true spirit of sport,

cynically seeking advantage and one-upmanship within the current rules. Conversely, Cal's appreciation and respect for the sport and 'commitment to the entire social practice of the game' (Hecló 2008, 4) illustrate what an anti-doping system might look like if athletes competed with a true appreciation with the spirit of sport and thought institutionally. Hecló terms this a 'respect-in-depth' and we can draw parallels to athletes who envisage their sport as a craft (see Gibbs, Salinas, and Turnock 2022), showing an appreciation to the internal and historical worth of the game. Applying this to the Ryan versus Rod debacle then, the latter's protestations demonstrate an unwillingness to think institutionally and a commitment to the rigid anti-policy ethos that pervades doping discourse in sport and beyond.

We therefore speculatively propose that a truly effective system of arbitrating against the raft of non-chemical doping practices should apply an Aristotelian lens and place the spirit of sport ideal at the centre of a more holistic system that is not bound by the anti-policy fundamentals of anti-doping. This system ought to be premised on positive notions of fairness and equity, rather than a negative compliance-based set of inflexible rules. This way, one-upmanship like Nicky Rod's greasing and spinal cord injured athletes' 'boosting' can be understood within a coherent ethical framework and the siloed dualism of doped versus not doped can be overcome. Of course, this proposition relies not just upon a shift in athletes' mindsets, but also those of sports club officials, owners, national governing bodies, and many more actors. We are not blind to the practical challenges involved in such a realignment. Given the distrust and cynicism that many feel towards governing institutions in contemporary life (Hecló 2008; Raymen 2024) as well as the cynical and hypercompetitive culture that pervades the highly lucrative global elite sports industry, we acknowledge that the course of action we propose is highly ambitious. However, as Hecló (2008) makes clear, deep down we all remain wedded to the value of institutions and the notion of collective ethics despite the prevailing cynicism within post-modernity. As such, we must be strident in opposing the superficially unopposable lure of anti-policy and pushing for an ethical system that is capable of truly arbitrating the relative morality of a panoply of advantage-seeking practices. Ultimately, we advocate for an elite sports industry which is committed to institutional thinking, valuing the Olympic idealism of the spirit of sport and respecting the *telos* of the games that athletes play and spectators adore.

We hope that this original contribution to the anti-doping discourse inspires some pause for thought and drives the debate from its current anti-policy stagnation to a more holistic understanding, underpinned by a commitment to thinking, acting, and arbitrating institutionally (Hecló 2008). After all, this is only the beginning of the journey *down the greasy slope* towards a true application of the spirit of sport.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank Dr Tom Raymen for his efforts in reading an early draft of this paper and guiding us towards the central theoretical and ethical frameworks from which we have drawn. We

would also like to extend our thanks to the Crime, Harm, and Ethics research cluster at Northumbria University, which provided the first and third authors with a platform to present our initial ideas and develop the conceptual framing of this piece.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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