

Testing times for dopers

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THE World Anti-doping Agency recently announced the imminent introduction of a new steroid passport as its latest “weapon” in the anti-doping struggle.

This, allied with four-year bans for doping offences, will be announced at the Wada summit in Johannesburg in mid-November.

The concept of the steroid passport is similar to that of the blood passport that has been in place in cycling, skiing and, more recently, athletics, for some time.

It’s easy to get bogged down in technicalities, but the basic summary is the following. In the past, the doping paradigm has been that Substance X is banned, so if it is found in the blood or urine of an athlete, that athlete is guilty of doping and is banned.

In hindsight, this paradigm has been revealed as embarrassingly naïve. It was too easy to avoid detection, challenge positive findings and find grey areas that undermined the entire system. Simply put, testing was archaic, too predictable and too easy to beat, and



ALMOST GOT AWAY: American cyclist Lance Armstrong duped almost everyone for many years while doping his way to success. He wouldn’t have had it so easy nowadays
Picture: SPENCER PLATT/GETTY IMAGES

that’s why the defences like Lance Armstrong’s “I’ve been tested hundreds of times” were so hollow and, frankly, meaningless.

In 2008, authorities introduced the Athlete Biological Passport. No longer would Substance X have to be found in the athlete’s body. Instead, authorities would look for its effects. Those effects are the source of the advantage, and so this was a real step forward.

For example, a preferred drug in endurance sports is EPO, a hor-

mone that signals the body to produce more oxygen-carrying red blood cells. The blood passport allowed authorities to test, not for EPO but rather red blood cell levels in the athlete’s body.

This meant that the athlete had fewer places to hide and a greater chance of detection.

The best analogy is to consider speed cameras. If you know there is a camera on a given stretch of highway, notice how almost every car speeds to the camera and then

slows down just for that section where they can be “caught”, and then speeds up once it passes it.

If athletes are the cars and doping controls are the cameras, then the old paradigm made it too obvious when the controls would happen, and so any vaguely intelligent athlete could plan ahead and back off doping in time to avoid detection.

The passport system, which measures athlete’s blood values regularly to create a unique “phys-

iological fingerprint”, makes it considerably more difficult to hide doping. Any method that alters the blood — even an undetectable one — can be detected because authorities don’t need to find the drug in the system, only its effects.

Using our analogy, they don’t need to catch you speeding on camera, but rather just figure out that you’re travelling too fast between point A and B, and you’re “flagged”.

The recent announcement adds steroid hormones to the testing battery, and so what is currently possible for doping that affects the blood will also be used for steroids like testosterone. Of course, any tool is only as effective as its use — your Ferrari may as well be a lawn mower if you park it in the garage and never use it. So it remains the challenge for authorities to apply the technology effectively.

There is evidence that these tools do deter doping and change the behaviour of athletes. They’ll never eradicate doping, but they can squeeze it to the point where it is ineffective enough that a clean athlete can win against a doped athlete. The anti-doping world is unfortunately no longer black and white, and that’s a victory in an increasingly complex landscape.

What is needed is to continue to push against apathy, and the introduction of a steroid passport, along with four-year bans, is part of that struggle.