

Dope-testing misunderstood

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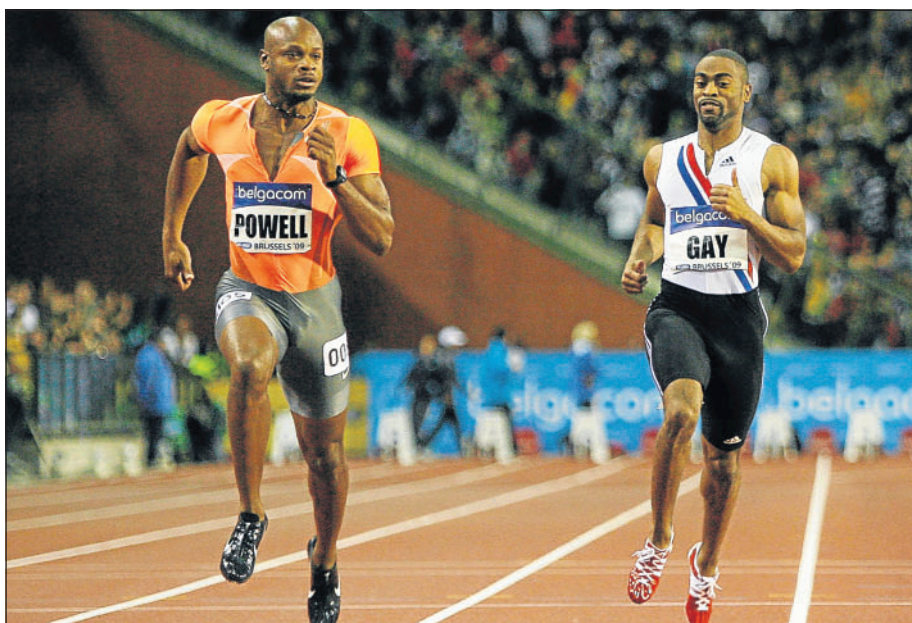
ROSS TUCKER



SHOULD doping be legalised? This is not a new question but it was recently the subject of a debate in a prestigious medical journal, and, with the World Anti-doping Agency's (WADA's) World Conference on Doping in Sport taking place in Johannesburg next week, it is a question worth revisiting.

The idea that doping should be legalised rears its head every time there is a high-profile doping case in sport, partly perhaps, as disappointment and frustration find an outlet in the peculiar paradoxical hope that comes from defeatism. If it were legal, we'd never be disappointed.

Those arguing for legalising doping do have some justifiable concerns, including the extreme cost of testing and enforcing sanctions, the increasingly Draconian, almost Orwellian, measures to monitor athletes and the negativity, and scepticism, that surrounds sport when there is doubt about the prevalence of doping and the ability of authorities to detect it. At the other end are the logical arguments of ethics, morality and the health of athletes. I believe the



DRUG DOPES: Jamaica's Asafa Powell, left, seen here beating American Tyson Gay, led the field home in the men's 100m sprint at the IAAF Golden League Van Damme Memorial athletics meeting in Brussels in September 2009. Both have tested positive for banned drugs this year
Picture: GETTY IMAGES

advocates for legalising doping miss the fundamental premise of anti-doping, however, and understanding this may help chart the future for WADA's efforts.

Those arguing for legal doping do so from the false premise that the purpose of anti-doping is to catch dopers. From this assumption, they argue that the regular occurrence of doping cases proves anti-doping is futile and should, therefore, not be funded. This logic, in addition to being defeatist, also misunderstands the fundamental purpose of

anti-doping, which is not to catch dopers, but to protect the rights and opportunities of athletes who want to be competitive in their chosen sport without doping. Catching drug users is merely the means by which anti-doping achieves this purpose.

Once you understand this, then your perspective on anti-doping efforts changes — for two reasons. Firstly, as long as there is even one athlete who wishes to compete clean, anti-doping is justified and righteous. And I can assure you,

there are many more than just one. Some may describe the desire to compete clean as "quaint", even arbitrary, but all rules are, to some extent, arbitrary and, suddenly changing these rules, even if justified as updating what is morally acceptable, would knock sport off its moral axis and undermine much of what makes it appealing. It would also become an open, all-out pharmaceutical arms race.

Secondly, if you appreciate that anti-doping exists to protect clean athletes, then you can understand

how it might achieve its purpose without having to catch every single doper. Think of anti-doping efforts as speed cameras: they change the driver's behaviour without necessarily detecting and punishing the illegal action.

Drivers slow down if they know there's a camera ahead. While they may speed either side of it, its value is in discouraging speeding, not necessarily catching offenders (and punishment of this behaviour is crucial to this deterrent value).

Anti-doping works the same way. If done often enough, if testing alters behaviour (there is evidence of this) and if it can be unpredictable, then it destabilises the entire doping system, making it more difficult to dope without detection.

The net result is that doping becomes a) riskier — the next test may be around the corner, and b) more expensive — you have to be smarter to get away with it. Those factors combined give clean athletes hope by squeezing allowable doping levels.

Where doping would otherwise be rampant and worth a 10% advantage, the deterrent effect cuts the benefit to, say, one percent — which can be negated by a clean athlete. That's what anti-doping authorities want. When WADA meet in Johannesburg next week, they will not be fighting an all-or-nothing battle to achieve 100% success.

For them, the goal is 100% clean. But victory is not defined in such black and white terms.

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