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Traces of Soviet Doping Culture Linger in Russia

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Discus thrower Darya Pishchalnikova.

Two months before the start of the Sochi Winter Olympics, the suspension of an unreliable Russian anti-doping lab by the World Anti-Doping Agency has served as a reminder of the country's checkered history when it comes to addressing the use of performance-enhancing drugs by its athletes.

The World Anti-Doping Agency, or WADA, set a deadline of April 1 for Moscow's Anti-Doping Center, which was to complete more than 2,000 tests for the Olympics at a satellite location in Sochi, to implement reforms designed to improve the reliability of its testing.

WADA director general David Howman said late last month that he was not concerned about the Anti-Doping Center's ability to revise its practices. But if the changes are deemed inadequate, the lab could have its accreditation revoked, which would force Sochi organizers to fly test samples to another facility during the Games.

Judging by historical evidence and testing records, problems with doping have been the norm in Russia and the Soviet Union for decades.

In October, the Russian Anti-Doping Agency, or RUSADA, reported that the number of suspected doping cases in the country since January had doubled from last year's figures. Of the 15 athletes caught doping at the 2012 London Olympics, seven were from countries of the former Soviet Union or Eastern bloc, including Russian cyclist Viktoria Baranova and discus thrower Darya Pishchalnikova.

Athletic success was glorified by the Soviet authorities, and the Soviet team won 1,204 Olympic medals from 1952 until the country's collapse in 1991, which to this day remains the second-largest total ever behind the U.S. This success struck many as too good to be fair, leading to suspicions about athletes taking performance-enhancing substances.

The secrecy of Soviet research laboratories made it difficult to substantiate any doping accusations. At the Moscow Summer Games in 1980, at the embryonic stage of drug testing, 645 anti-doping tests were conducted but no athletes were found to have consumed banned substances.

"Research on the medical and biological aspects of sport was an integral part of the athletic agenda in the Soviet Union," said Dr. Michael Kalinski, a sport science scholar who served as the chairman of the department of exercise biochemistry at the Institute of Physical Culture in Kiev from 1972 to 1990. "All orders to organize and finance such research were given in a centralized and secretive system."

During the 1970s and 1980s, the Soviet State Sport Committee ordered several research institutions to conduct studies on the effect of performance-enhancing supplements and their possible use by Soviet athletes preparing for Olympic Games.

According to Dr. Kalinski, research on the medical aspects of sport was conducted in 28 State Institutes of Physical Education and certain State Research Institutes of Physical Culture.

Soviet scientists found that creatine, an organic acid that increases muscular capacity, improved runners' performance by 1 percent in the 100-meter dash and by 1.7 percent in the 200 meters, boosts that could make the difference between a gold and silver medal.

But the Soviet Union did not stop at creatine, a nonbanned substance that today is one of the world's most-consumed dietary supplements.

According to research by Nikolai Volkov, chairman of the department of biochemistry and bioenergetics at the Russian State University of Physical Education, Sport, Youth and Tourism, two state institutes conducted clandestine state-sponsored research to perfect blood doping, a medical procedure that increases the number of red blood cells in the bloodstream to enhance athletic performance.

Blood doping was, and remains, banned by the International Olympic Committee.

Swimmers, cyclists, rowers, skiers, biathletes and skaters systematically blood-doped for the 1976 Montreal and 1980 Moscow Games, according to Volkov's research.

"Officials, team doctors and pharmacologists made drugs available to coaches, who were under enormous pressure from the Communist Party to produce winners," Dr. Kalinski said.

Former Soviet swimmer and current president of the All-Russian Swimming Federation, Vladimir Salnikov, nicknamed the "Monster in the Waves," denies he was ever pressured to use banned substances.

"When preparing for the Moscow Olympics and other events, I never took any banned substances," said Salnikov, the first man to swim the 800-meter freestyle in less than eight minutes.

"My coach and I decided that my training regime was enough for me to be successful. I did not need anything else."

While Salnikov conceded that he had heard of "doping incidents" during his days with the Soviet national swimming team, he said he had not witnessed doping among teammates.

"How can you know if somebody is taking something if you do no spend 24 hours a day with them? You cannot," he said.

But Salnikov's attitude toward doping would appear to have been the exception.

In a Soviet presentation at an anti-doping conference in Norway in 1991, it was stated that 44 percent of the Soviet Union's 240 top athletes considered doping "essential and even inevitable" for winning.

In a perpetual tug-of-war with the West in athletics, the Soviet Union resorted to extreme measures to ensure its athletes would succeed and, most importantly, not get caught doping.

In 1989, Smena magazine reported that the previous summer, the Soviet Union had kept a secret $2.5 million laboratory on a ship anchored 60 kilometers from Seoul, the site of that year's summer Olympics.

ђPre-emptive testing facilities and assistance were provided to ensure that athletes would escape detection," Dr. Kalinski said.

"If an athlete's pharmacological preparation was mismanaged, he or she would be withdrawn from an upcoming international competition with the public excuse of injury or illness," he said.

At the 1988 Calgary Winter Games, Soviet skier Allar Levandi, an Estonian, was told by training staff that he had a "terrible stomachache" and was to drop out of the competition, according to Smena.

But the Soviet Union's development of banned substances and techniques was not tied directly to sport, according to RUSADA director Kamayev. The substances and techniques initially were developed for the country's military and its space program, while athletic doping was only a secondary application.

"Today, doping is understood as a violation of the rules," Kamayev said. "In the Soviet Union,

doping was not viewed as it is today. Having worked in a closed government institution for 25 years, I can safely say that there were never any Soviet governmental programs meant to purposely violate rules."

"Doping — as we know it today — was never an objective of the Soviet programs. The Soviet Union was more interested in the rational and medical reasons behind taking supplements."

Dr. Kalinski, however, said Soviet authorities were fully aware of the situation.

"Procedures in the U.S.S.R. were highly centralized," he said. "It was mandatory that each annual and five-year research plan for all sport institutions in the country be included in an 'All-Union Plan,' which was approved by governmental officials prior to implementation."

"It is highly unlikely that crucial decisions about financing and implementing doping research programs by the State Central Institute of Physical Culture in Moscow were made without the knowledge and consent of governmental officials," he added.

Whether to better prevent the detection of steroids or to promote cleaner sports, Russia possesses some of the world's most high-end anti-doping methods.

Last month, German scientists presented their findings about a Russian-developed test that detects steroids in smaller quantities in athletes' biological samples months after drugs had entered their systems. The scientists revealed that 10 percent of the old samples tested contained steroids.

Kamayev also expressed confidence in Moscow's Anti-Doping Center, saying that its suspension was part of a standard review procedure and that he had no doubt the laboratory would be ready for the Sochi Games.

"The Moscow Anti-Doping Center conducts one of the world's largest quantity of tests," Kamayev said. "The laboratory is currently under much stress and working under difficult conditions. Under these circumstances, what is happening is completely normal."

While equipped to detect sports' most cunning cheaters, Russia has struggled to rid itself of its Soviet doping heritage.

"When the Soviet Union came apart, thousands of sport bureaucrats, pharmacologists and coaches — 'trained to drug' their athletes — essentially remained in their positions," Dr. Kalinski said.

Lenient social attitudes toward doping in modern Russia also match trainers' Soviet upbringing.

"Russians are not that harsh with athletes who have taken banned substances," Kamayev said. "In Europe or America, athletes on banned substances lose their 'hero status' right away."

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