The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Sharapova in the Crossfire: Russia's Latest Doping Scandal

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March 10, 2016



Maria Sharapova is the major victim of new regulations banning a substance called meldonium. It is believed that one in five Russian athletes were using the drug last year.

Perhaps no pill in history has carried such a high price as the dose of meldonium that top Russian tennis star Maria Sharapova took before the Australian Open quarter-finals on Jan. 26 — which she lost to Serena Williams.

The highest-paid female athlete of the last decade looked subdued when she announced at a specially convened press conference that she had failed a doping test. It was the first time that a leading world-class tennis player had been caught doping. Within hours, three of her major corporate advertising sponsors suspended cooperation.

This turn of events came so unexpectedly that it is not that hard to believe Sharapova when she says she did not know that meldonium, or mildronate, had been added to the list of banned substances this January.

The tennis world was largely sympathetic. "As Maria said," Serena Williams commented, "she's ready to take responsibility. And that takes courage and heart." The only prominent Russian athlete to strongly condemn Sharapova was Russian Tennis Association vice president Yevgeny Kafelnikov, the best male Russian tennis player in history, having won the Australian Open and Roland Garros in the late 1990s.

Sharapova would appear to be no Lance Armstrong. It is unclear why she would risk her career and endorsements worth tens of millions of dollars for the sake of medication with uncertain benefits. Sharapova claims she has been taking the drug for 10 years to combat signs of diabetes — to which her family is prone — irregular EKG results and a magnesium deficiency.

Vitamin or Drug?

Russian athletes and even doctors compare meldonium to Vitamin C. It was always on the same level as Levokarnitin, a vitamin, confirms Olesya Shevchenko, a former tennis journalist. Many Russian fitness websites contain recommendations on "How to take mildronate for sports."

Meldonium was invented in Latvia in 1975 and is very popular in the former Soviet Union. A package of the drug can be purchased with a prescription at any pharmacy. It's not licensed in the U.S., and Sharapova, who has been based in the U.S. since childhood, most likely was recommended to take it by Russian Federation managers or doctors years ago.

Its primary effect is in helping the body recover more quickly after physical activity. Its creator, Latvian chemist Ivar Kalvinsh, told The Moscow Times that he does not consider it a doping drug. "With meldonium," he explained, "an athlete cannot run faster or farther — he is only protected from ischemia and oxygen deficiency when working at full capacity."

But the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) thought otherwise after a study published in February 2015 found widespread use of mildronate in a variety of sports. 2.2 percent of samples tested positive. "The misuse of mildronate is not limited to a particular sport or to a group of sports [...] The findings of high mildronate concentrations in samples originating not from so called 'high-risk' sport disciplines are alarming," the experts wrote.

WADA announced in October 2015 that it would include meldonium on its list of banned substances. "This high level of use by athlete for non-therapeutic purposes prompted WADA to ban meldonium from Jan. 1, 2016. It appears that the use of meldonium has been widespread by Eastern European athletes across many sports," Richard Ings, the former head of the Australian Anti-Doping Agency, told The Moscow Times. Meldonium was assigned an S4 classification as belonging to the group of "hormones and metabolic modulators." Athletes caught using it face disqualification from their sport for up to four years.

Fresh Blow for Russian Sport

It quickly became clear that Russian athletes would be hit hardest by the new regulation. German television journalist Hajo Seppelt, whose documentary films sparked the investigation into the Russian doping scandal, claims that one in five Russian athletes was using meldonium last year, while it was still permitted. Of 4,316 samples drawn from Russian

athletes, traces of the drug were found in 724, or 17 percent — almost eight times the level internationally. Almost every athlete in Russia and Eastern Europe took it, agrees Shevchenko.

Sharapova was far from the only athlete to test positive for meldonium. On March 7 that distinction also befell Yekaterina Bobrova, who won an Olympic gold medal with the Russian figure skating team in 2014.

Three more Russian athletes tested positive for the drug on March 8: national volleyball team member Alexander Markin, Olympic short-track speed skating champion Semion Elistratov and Pavel Kulizhnikov, two-time world speed skating all-round sprint champion and world record-holder for 500 meters. Katyusha cycling team member Eduard Vorganov also tested positive for meldonium back in February, but it is Kulizhnikov who faces the most severe sanctions. He was caught for doping several years ago, and if his second sample tests positive now, he could be banned for life from the sport.

Moreover, Russian Sports Minister Vitaly Mutko admitted that more cases could surface. "Unfortunately, a lot of athletes took this medicine," he said.

As recently as last December, Mutko's ministry became the focus of an unprecedented doping scandal: WADA accused Russian officials and even intelligence agencies of corruption in substituting doping samples — in other words, of direct involvement in doping in track and field sports. The agency also suspended membership of the All-Russia Athletic Foundation (ARAF) in the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF).

The scandal has ruined the reputation of Russian sports. The director of the Russian Anti-Doping Agency (RUSADA) resigned in December and now, at the request of WADA, doping samples of Russian athletes are carried out in Britain. New leadership has been installed at ARAF and its former director, Valentin Balakhnichev, may face criminal charges for corruption, Interfax reported in February.

This time around, Russian sport officials are acting as if they are not responsible for the problem. Now Russia can present the story of meldonium as a chain of unfortunate incidents, and the fact that the ban was instituted only recently enables officials to blame individual doctors, coaches and athletes, rather than censuring the entire Russian athletic system.

No Mercy

WADA decisions were hardly anti-Russian in nature. But now, it is obvious that Russian doping samples are subjected to particular scrutiny, and the tense relations between WADA and Russia mean that any even slightly suspect form of aid given to popular Russian athletes will fall under the ban.

In a way, Maria Sharapova fell victim to this lack of the benefit of the doubt, and straight shooters WADA show no mercy. "Maria Sharapova is Russia's most celebrated international athlete. She is a five time Grand Slam champion. She carried the Russian flag at the opening ceremony of the London 2012 Olympic Games. She is an icon of Russian sport and her positive test is a huge blow to her personal and professional reputation. A repercussion of her positive will be a loss of confidence by the public in Russian sport," Richard Ings said.

It's not sponsor packages and all the money that comes from them that troubles her most now, assures Shevchenko. "She's incredible fighter, one of very few tennis players who start playing better while losing and can turn a no-way-out situation into victory. The most severe punishment she can get is not money but being banned from the game."

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