

Australian media furore over sport “drug cheats”

By Mike Head
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Australian media outlets and the Labor government have seized upon last week’s release of an Australian Crime Commission (ACC) report into sports doping to launch an entirely hypocritical campaign against alleged links to “organised crime”.

What is completely buried in all the coverage is the source of the constant pressure placed on athletes to use performance-enhancing drugs—the multi-billion dollar profits being made by the corporate elite, including the media owners, from the sports-media-entertainment-gambling industry.

Despite a lack of any detail in the report—no sporting codes, clubs or players were identified—the media declared that the ACC had exposed a nexus between organised crime and “corrupt elements” within the sports science, conditioning and coaching staff of sports bodies, especially professional football clubs. Headlines proclaimed the “darkest day” in Australian sporting history.

The ACC said a secret year-long investigation had found evidence of widespread use by elite athletes of sophisticated peptide hormones and other substances, including some not yet approved for human use, which potentially breached sport anti-doping rules.

Yet the timing of the report, and its release at a stage-managed media conference, featuring ACC chief John Lawler, two federal ministers and the CEOs of the main football and cricket bodies, appeared designed as an exercise in damage control by the government and the big business-controlled sporting-related industry.

The publication of the report followed the revelation that as many of 80 percent of players at the Essendon football club in Melbourne were injected with experimental supplements last year to boost body mass and strength, whether the players wanted them or not. It seems from the ACC report that this was just one instance of a widespread and expanding trend.

An *Australian* editorial entitled, “Drug cheating threatens our sporting culture,” demanded “harsher deterrents” before “fans and young players lose confidence in their favourite

games and sporting heroes.”

The truth is that the “culture” that dominates sports under capitalism is one where vast business interests depend on winning championships and boosting “heroes”. This makes the resort to increasingly sophisticated performance-enhancing substances almost inevitable.

In the public hand-wringing, the least concern is for the health and well-being of the athletes, who are expected to play ever-longer and more intensive seasons, in order to generate revenue. The overriding priority is to maintain the “clean image” of the sports on which so much depends commercially.

According to the latest available Australian Bureau of Statistics data, in 2006 the total annual income generated by the sport and recreation industry in Australia was estimated at \$8.82 billion, a figure that will have grown substantially since then. As Saturday’s editorial in the *Australian Financial Review* bluntly stated: “Australian sport has become big business.”

The above total does not include the \$23.5 billion wagered on racing and sports in Australia in 2011-12—with the lion’s share taken by three giants, Tattersall’s, Tabcorp and Crown, together with rapidly growing online betting companies such as Sportsbet, Centrebet and Betfair. Nor does it take into account the advertising revenues generated by the commercial sports broadcasters, including Fox Sports, which recently agreed to pay \$1.253 billion for the AFL broadcasting rights between 2012 and 2016, and \$1.025 billion for National Rugby League games over five years.

The ACC report pointed to some of the extreme commercial pressures involved. “The standard of competition at the elite level of sport has reached a point where winning margins are now measured in hundredths of a second,” it stated. “Remaining competitive at the elite level is now dependent on access to the best sports scientists and use of the latest technology.”

Individual players often have little or no control over the resulting “performance-enhancing” regime. It has become

integral to the industry. By one estimate, each AFL club spends at least \$2 million a year on “sports science” consultants and techniques.

For the players themselves, the difference between winning and losing can mean either joining the elite few who become millionaires, or languishing in the ranks of those whose short-lived sporting careers soon end. In the AFL, for example, eight players were paid more than \$1 million each last year—in match payments alone—while nearly half the listed players earned less than \$200,000, and a quarter less than \$100,000. For most players, this offers little reward for their time in sport, which usually lasts 10 years, at most, and then only if they avoid serious injury.

Clearly, as highlighted by the recent revelations surrounding American cyclist Lance Armstrong, the corrupting influence of corporate interests and predatory entrepreneurship on professional sports and athletes is a global phenomenon.

Yet the focus of the ACC report, and the official and media response, was solely on criminal syndicates. The ACC said organised crime groups were sourcing drugs through complicit doctors, sports scientists and anti-ageing clinics, and that people with criminal associations had established business partnerships with the major sporting codes.

The report warned that athletes who took drugs were vulnerable to exploitation for other criminal purposes, including match-fixing. However, the unclassified version of the report offered no details. Instead, evidence has been handed to the elite sporting organisations—which have presided over the increasingly corporate-dominated “culture” for years—as well as to police agencies.

At the same time, dire threats were issued at the media conference against the players who have been the victims of the immense pressure to produce contest-winning performances. Sports Minister Kate Lundy declared that “drug takers” would not be permitted to go on unpunished. Justice Minister Jason Clare denounced “cheating with the help of criminals.”

There was another agenda also at the media conference. Clare and Lundy outlined a government response that focused on new legislation to strengthen the powers of the Australian Sports Anti-Doping Authority (ASDA), mirroring the draconian powers of the ACC. Under the plan, already being pushed through parliament, ASDA could compel athletes, officials, or anyone else, to attend questioning sessions and hand over documents.

ACC chief Lawler highlighted the powers wielded by his agency, saying it had conducted almost 30 so-called coercive hearings into doping cases, as well as telephone intercepts. As well as wielding extensive secret

phone-tapping powers, the ACC can summon people for compulsory questioning, conducted in secret, backed by the threat of five years’ jail for those who refuse to cooperate.

This star chamber-style regime ordinarily operates with great secrecy. It is illegal for someone who has been questioned to disclose information about the summons, the hearing or anything said during questioning. Even their lawyers are similarly gagged. These provisions overturn centuries-old principles against self-incrimination and detention without trial.

Exactly why the ACC, nominally a crime-fighting agency, was investigating performance-enhancing substances, the taking of which is not actually illegal, was not explained.

The ACC’s involvement in sport highlights the Labor government’s widening use of the agency, which was originally created in 2002, supposedly to fight terrorism and organised crime. Last year, the government gave the go-ahead for forced ACC interrogations of arriving asylum seekers, violating their basic right under international law to flee persecution.

Last year also, Prime Minister Julia Gillard’s government pushed through laws allowing the ACC to share its information with other federal and state police and intelligence forces, overseas spy and law enforcement agencies, and major corporate entities, such as banks and telecommunications providers. The ACC was further authorised to feed information to federal and state ministers, facilitating close collaboration with the political and corporate elite in orchestrating witch hunts.

The campaign to justify and promote the use of the ACC’s extraordinary powers against athletes and sporting players is another warning that the political and security establishment is turning to the use of police-state methods. This is under conditions in which it is preparing repressive measures to deal with heightened social and political unrest as the global economic crisis produces deeper budget cuts, job losses, inequality and social distress (see: “In wake of British riots, Australian government preparing for youth unrest”).

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